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A GODDESS OF AFRICA

A STORY OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE

BY

ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

AUTHOR OF "A SON OF MARR," "MASKED IN MYSTERY," "SQUIRE JOHN,"
"HER RESCUE FROM THE TURKS," "SAVED BY THE SWORD,"
"A BAR SINISTER," "A GODDESS OF AFRICA,"
"THE GIRL FROM HONG-KONG"



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THE END
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FIRST PART

A GODDESS OF AFRICA.

BOOK I.

THE ARGONAUTS OF '96.

CHAPTER I.

FUGITIVES OF THE ZAMBEZI!

It was in June, 1896.

South Africa was in a state of eruption, and grave questions presented themselves for solution. Jameson had made his historic ride over the border in response to the appeal of the Uitlanders in Johannesburg, to meet his Waterloo at the hands of bluff Oom Paul and his horde of Boers; while further north the hollow roll of the tom-tom or war-drum filled the land of the fierce Matabele.

Buluwayo had undergone a siege, and the renegade Zulus were only beaten back after a most desperate series of encounters in which the losses had been heavy on both sides.

It was indeed a period fraught with tremendous issues to the daring Anglo-Saxon settlers of South Africa. History was being made every-day. As in America thirty, fifty, an hundred years ago, so it is in this new wonderland of to-day—step by step the

border has been pushed forward, the country wrested from savage ignorance and superstition and made to bloom like the rose.

Perhaps half a century hence a South African Chicago with a million or two inhabitants may rear its mercantile palaces where to-day the horde of *impi* gather in their *kraals* to plot the destruction of their white enemies. It is fate.

Everywhere the torch of civilization has repelled the darkness of ignorance. Africa waited long and patiently, but the hour of her emancipation has arrived. The love of gold is the loadstone that has drawn tens of thousands to this end of the earth, just as it sent the Spaniards under Cortez to Mexico and Pizarro into Peru, opening up new worlds to be conquered.

How long would California have remained undeveloped had it not been for the wonderful discovery of her golden deposits that created a mad stampede from all quarters of the globe in that direction?

It was in this month of June, never to be forgotten by those pioneers of South African civilization, that the series of remarkable events which it is our pleasure to string together in the form of a romance, took place.

The day was just at its close when two rather sorry looking individuals staggered under the shelter of a giant tree in the heart of the wilderness far to the north of the Matoppo hills, and with their numerous bundles, dropped to the ground, evidently almost utterly exhausted.

There was that about the taller and more robust to indicate the American, while his companion's voice and manner of speech proclaimed him a son of fair France.

Professor Jules Verdant had, in his ardent desire to

discover new wonders that would send his name ringing down the ages, undertaken many Quixotic expeditions, from spending two years on the mighty, fever-haunted Amazon to dangerous pilgrimages to Fez, to old Khartoum, and Ashantee; but when he undertook to pierce the heart of Africa in company with a bold young American, in the hope of meeting the tribes of dwarfs, spoken of by other travelers, and possibly solving Darwin's great theory, he realized that it was destined to be the most serious expedition of his life.

His companion, Rex Hastings had been influenced by other motives than those connected with science, and what the nature of the mission might be that urged him to undertake such tremendous hazards will in due course of time be made manifest.

They had started in on the East Coast, just south of the Zanzibar country ruled by the Sultan Hamed, some months before with a retinue of many porters, and a guard of fighting men capable of doing considerable damage when armed with modern appliances for conducting the art of war.

Hence, their present wretched condition would indicate that they must have been engaged in numerous serious battles. Ill fortune seemed to have haunted them; men in whom they trusted deserted from the expedition; others were slain, or fell into the hands of the hostile negro tribes through whose country they were compelled to pass.

Thus their numbers had dwindled, but with undaunted courage they refused to turn back. Finally overwhelming disasters had come upon them, just when *Hastings believed the tremendous work he had set himself was about to be carried out, and after a series of*

hot engagements with the savage enemy, the two forlorn fugitives, believing they had distanced their pursuers, threw themselves upon the ground under the great tree that stretched its giant arms out to shield them from the light of the declining sun. Hastings looked haggard, but there was a gleam in his clear eyes that spoke of an unquenchable spirit—of a heart that could not be conquered by adversities.

He even smiled to see how carefully the odd genius at his side deposited his packages upon the ground, caressing them as tenderly as though they were dear to his heart, which was the exact truth, since the bundles contained the sole results of his weary months of scientific research during this venturesome pilgrimage through the heart of the Dark Continent.

As the savant would never desert these trophies while he had strength to "tote" them, it finally devolved upon Hastings to carry both guns, the ammunition and what other articles they had left out of the immense stock with which the expedition had begun.

He now proceeded to open one of the packages and produced a sparing amount of food.

"Come, we must take a little refreshment, professor. It has been a hard day, and I fear we've lost our last man. My mind would be more at ease if I knew how matters were going on to the south. Those rumors of an uprising of the Matabele disturb me. If they prove to be true I fear we shall never be able to reach Bulawayo."

The French man of science, having ascertained that his thirteen precious packages were all there and in good condition, condescended to share in the humble *repast*, and his manner was just as charming and the

volume of his chatter just as unrestricted as though he stood in his dearly beloved Bois de Bologne or under the *Arc de Triomphe*.

The jolly little professor was certainly a boon companion for a long journey, since he knew how to chase dull care away.

Hastings did not appear fully at ease, for his eyes almost constantly roved over the ground they had covered in arriving at this tree, and more than once he looked serious, while his hand involuntarily reached out in the direction of the repeating rifle, that had served him faithfully all through these months of wandering.

The shadows had commenced to issue forth from their hiding-places, and the forest seemed peopled with grotesque goblins that would require but a small stretch of the imagination to transform into skulking blacks, eager to close in upon the fugitives.

In reality it was a peaceful scene, and under different conditions Hastings might have experienced an abounding admiration for the primeval charm that rested upon that African wood, peopled with feathered songsters, and in spots radiant with the bloom of countless flowers, though this was the season corresponding to our bleak November.

"*Mon Dieu,*" said the Gaul, as he bit into the piece of hard tack which had been given him to gnaw upon, "zis is one supper fit for ze gods—at least it is a shame two gentlemen students do not fare better. Still I have ze great hope we are coming near ze end, Monsieur Rex, and zat before long we sall only look back upon zis experience with a smile."

"*Perhaps,*" muttered the other, still watching the

skulking shadows suspiciously, "and I shall be glad for your sake, professor, when we reach a place of safety. As for myself, you know full well I have only had a taste."

"A taste—*parbleau!* hear ze man—a taste, when for ze last month not one day it have pass wizout we place our heads in ze lion's mouth—not one night zat we feel sure we will see ze morrow's sun. *Begar!* I like your nerve, sar. Pray tell me zen when you ze full meal will take?"

"Just as soon as I am able to get up another expedition. Now that I know my wonderful secret was not the vapping of a crazed brain but founded on actual truth, I am more resolved than ever before to win the game. In my pocket, as you know, I carry positive evidence that the treasure of the dead volcano is no myth, no Sinbad the Sailor illusion, but an actual bona-fide fact. I have sworn to devote my life to securing it, and I am a man to stick closer than a mustard plaster."

"Ah! zat will I vouch for, and a companion royal. Nevaire will I forget how you stand over me in ze gloom of zat night and beat back ze human jackals wif ze butt of ze gun. But, Monsieur Rex, do not think I am quite blind because I have so devoted been to ze interests of science. When you turn ze face to ze north once more, I am positif it will not only be to find zat wonderful treasure of ze extinct volcano, zat lies in ze heart of Africa, but because zere is one hope of again looking on a beautiful face zat charm us both."

Hastings appeared a little confused, as though the *French savant's* shot had indeed struck very close at home, but he laughed it off.

"What's the use of denying the soft impeachment, professor? To my dying day I shall never forget the startling impression that fair idol made upon me as seen in the midst of a thousand black kneeling worshipers. She was as beautiful as a dream. I have seen her in my sleep since—I shall see her always. Yes, I would turn my face again toward that land of heathen darkness and fetish worshipers if no other influence moved me than a desire to once more feast my eyes on her face. But say no more upon the subject. We are not yet out of the woods, and I fear these unseen perils may be too much for us, if, as we have reason to suspect, the Matabele god M'limo has sent the blood-drinkers out to war."

"*Sacre!* if zat be ze case, our only hope is to turn aside, following ze big hills and ze small ones, *kopjes* zey call 'em, so zat we go around ze plateau between ze rivers Gwelo and Khami, zat mark ze home of Matabele."

"How large is this plateau, professor?" asked Rex, who relied considerably upon the superior knowledge of his companion with relation to the topography of the country.

"More zan one hundred miles across and half of zat north and south."

Hastings shrugged his shoulders at the reply.

"That means more days of hiding and going hungry, more nights of travel. Well, we can do it, professor, if given half a chance; but it goes against the grain. What wouldn't I give for a regiment of Illinois militia just now. What a swathe we would cut through the land where the beastly tom-tom sounds and incites the *black warriors to battle.*"

“And I would be charmed quite could I but have ze regiment of Francs-tireurs on ze ground. In ze mirror of ze mind I can see zem charge upon ze heathen—what care zey whether ze assegais fly as thick as hail stones, and ze bullets sing like mad hornets past zere ears. For ze lilies of France! *Mon Dieu!* what can stand before such heroes—ze black impis break and fly—zey throw away zere weapons, and shriek to zere god to save. Nothing can resist ze charge of ze terrible tigers. So new glories are won, and again England goes hand in hand with France in peopling ze desert places of ze earth. Such thoughts inspire ze lonely traveler, who blazes ze trail of civilization through ze wilderness, and whose torch——”

Just there the professor came to a sudden pause in his really eloquent effort, not that his breath had given out or his subject ceased to arouse enthusiasm. It was because Rex suddenly clutched him by the arm and dragged him to the ground with a single muscular effort. And as the savant assumed this involuntary horizontal position, there was heard a strange hissing whirr, followed by a dull thud, and turning his head the professor saw quivering in the tree trunk, with its lancet head buried three inches deep, a deadly assegai of the war-like Makalakas.

CHAPTER II.

THE BORDER LAND OF ETERNITY.

AGAIN did Professor Jules owe the preservation of his life to the quick wit and ready hand of his companion in arms, since, but for his hasty descent from a perpendicular that murderous weapon of a South African warrior must have passed through his body.

Hastings realized that the crisis he had feared was upon them, since their pursuers were on deck, filled with the zeal of warfare, and determined to accomplish their destruction.

He was a man of action, this American, and even though the condition of affairs seemed next to hopeless, such a thing as a surrender to the inevitable never entered his mind.

That is characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon blood—a grim determination to go down with colors flying.

It has been made historical on many a bloody field of battle in England, Scotland, America, yes, wherever the English language is spoken throughout the world.

If die he must he would meet his fate with face to the foe, a weapon in his hand, the fire of battle in his heart.

That would be the glorious end of a brave soldier—who could wish a better?

As with one hand he dragged Verdant to the ground, his other reached out and clutched the repeating rifle that lay close by.

In days gone by that weapon had served him faith-

fully, and he knew he could place reliance upon it now. So long as there was a leaden messenger within its chamber, and he had the strength to press the trigger, it would send forth its deadly summons, until a breastwork of victims encompassed him about. As Travis and Crockett fell at the Alamo in Texas, with Mexicans piled waist high around them, so this bold son of Illinois meant to meet his end.

Considering the desperate nature of the situation he was remarkably cool and collected. He had anticipated just such a decisive moment as this and in his mind arranged his method of meeting the crisis.

“To arms! they come, the Turk, the Turk!” was what he shouted in the ear of his ally, and the men of that gallant Greek patriot Bozarris certainly could not have shown greater agility in pouncing down upon the swarming foe than did these two fugitives of the wilds in facing the blacks.

Already dusky figures could be seen darting from tree to tree, and Hastings, knowing the value of time, lost not a second in discharging his gun.

The report of the Winchester seemed to arouse the echoes of Hades—from every quarter there arose the most fiendish of yells, and one who had never heard these battle cries of the savage Makalakas before might well be pardoned for believing that a legion of black fiends from Tophet, led by Mephistopheles himself, had burst the barriers of the Inferno, and sought new victims on earth.

There was no time for exercising any deliberation in the line of judgment—to strike speedily and often, with the most fatal result was their one hope, and even that held out but faint chances of success.

Hastings was crouching there, almost flat on his face, behind the heterogeneous bundles which the savant had so carefully and solicitously piled up. They promised, at least, to form some sort of a barrier for the wretched fugitives, though the professor when making his collection had never dreamed to what base use they might eventually be put.

The rapid detonation of the Winchester told that it was in the hands of one who knew how to utilize its wonderful repeating qualities to the utmost, and the fiendish shouts of the black warriors no longer expressed only rage, but pain and consternation as well.

In the midst of the fusilade came a much heavier discharge, very similar to the boom of the Dutch settler's yager or elephant gun.

Strange to say, the professor had insisted upon arming himself with one of these heavy though effective weapons, which appeared the more ridiculous when the rather undersized stature of the fighting Gaul was taken into consideration.

This mammoth gun had always been an object of extreme solicitude to Jules. So long as they had porters, a stalwart black had usually trotted at his heels bearing the yager; but of late it had become quite a burden to Hastings, who more than once contemplated the feasibility of quietly allowing it to sink into some "drift" they were crossing.

Only on a few occasions had the learned savant deigned to discharge his gun; and it was always an open question in the mind of Hastings whether almost equally disastrous results in the rear were not apt to follow such an explosion as before its muzzle.

Therefore, when the thunderous crash of the elephant

gun sounded so close to his ears, he experienced something like a sensation of awe, and half expected to find the form of the gallant Frenchman hurled across his back.

"What luck?" he bellowed, so that his words might be heard above the awful clamor.

"It is well," came in the high-pitched voice of the professor, who had evidently taken the precaution to brace himself ere pulling the trigger.

So Hastings again applied himself to the task of distributing the remainder of his leaden pills with a discrimination that was influenced by the audacity of the assailants; and since little of his ammunition went to waste, it can be set down as positive that his wonderful nerve served him as faithfully in this crisis as it had in times gone by.

Brief though the time that had elapsed since the advent of the first black warrior on the scene, those of the enemy who fortunately escaped the fire of the compatriots had rushed in close enough to discharge their own weapons toward the spot where a cloud of powder smoke told of occupancy.

Some were armed with guns of modern make, for long contact with the gold and diamond hunters had made the Matabele and their sable allies familiar with such engines of destruction, and while possibly the owners might have no just claim to the title of sharpshooters, still they were able to keep pumping at their engines of war, and send a swarm of bullets toward the center of the disturbance, that hurtled and hissed about the ears of the besieged with the noisy venom of angry bees.

Numerous war spears also came singing through

space, nor was the singular whirr of the deadly Zulu assegai unheard.

Hastings had been wounded in several places, but none of them were serious cuts, and in the fever of battle he hardly took notice of the fact.

Hearing a thud close at his elbow he turned his head to see a Makalaka spear pinning poor Jules to the tree ; but his feeling of horror was dissipated upon discovering that the squirming professor had not really been seriously injured, since the weapon had only passed through the slack of his garments.

Finding himself unable to break away, the plucky little savant continued to rattle out the contents of his revolver, and his shrill clarion voice could be heard high above the roar of the *mêlée*, as he bade the savage foe such defiance as only a son of France could express.

All this really occurred in a minute of time.

Seconds are laden with grave results when the blare of battle is in the air.

The cloud of smoke which served to conceal them from the sharp eyes of the surrounding blacks, equalized matters at the same time by rendering it impossible for them to see where to direct their shots.

So, while their weapons still held a few more charges, the two fugitives ceased firing.

Hastings snatched at the spear upon which his smaller ally was in one sense impaled ; but it required his utmost strength to tear it loose from the tree, so that Jules could once more be master of his own actions.

Perhaps Rex had some vague idea that they might creep off, thanks to the friendly smoke that hugged the vicinity, and the gathering shades of dusk.

Be that as it may, he was given no time to put the inspiration into practical play. Perhaps the undaunted little Gaul would have utterly refused to have deserted the scientific treasures of his collection to which he was so firmly wedded.

Before Rex could begin to shape a plan for the future there came a fresh burst of awful yells, and through the smoke sprang the figures of the Makalaka warriors, brandishing their arms, and looking in the full panoply of their war dress like demons.

Thus, in an instant the battle had become a hand to hand affair, where fierce blows were exchanged, where the discharge of a firearm was muffled by the fact of its being pressed against a human form, where two whites, back to back, were pitted against a horde of cruel and merciless foes, eager to drink their blood.

The sword of Damocles hung suspended by a single thread.

So the lives of these twain seemed on the very brink—the passage of one minute would mark their transition from this world into the next.

But that minute proved long enough to save them from such a fate.

Alone it were utterly impossible for them to win, and actually figured the chance of relief coming to them in this wild country north of Matabeleland was about one in a thousand.

Yet it came, such are the vagaries of fate—it came when even the stout heart of that hopeful son of Illinois had given up all expectation of surviving, so that he only fought on with the grim resolution of despair.

Above the tempest of war cries that sounded in his

ears, Rex suddenly heard shouts that he feared must be the creation of a disordered brain—shouts that could come from none other than Saxon throats—shouts that, raised in unison formed a mighty “hurrah” that dwarfed the screams of the blacks as the thunder of the tempest might overshadow the feeble growl of cannon.

The struggling mass of sable warriors that desperately endeavored to crush in upon the two white heroes also heard this shout from the forest.

To them it was the most dreaded sound upon earth. They had on numerous occasions engaged with the sturdy sons of England who guarded the border land. Desperate battles had been fought in the days gone by, and these black warriors from bitter experience had come to respect the prowess of the police employed by the British South Africa Company, as well as to fear Cecil Rhodes, the wizard whose hand controlled the destinies of this promising land.

Confusion immediately seized upon the assailants. Their glow of positive victory gave way to sudden despair.

Many turned and ran, hardly knowing in which direction the danger lay.

A few remained as if in the hope of accomplishing the death of the two fugitives ere themselves seeking safety in flight.

Flying figures could now be seen through the rifts of powder smoke—figures mounted on horses, and dashing hither and yon with a rapidity that could only have been equaled by the Bedouins of the desert.

From these galloping figures there came flash after flash, and the rapid percussion of reports proclaimed a

condition of affairs that could not be other than unhealthy for the unfortunate blacks who had lingered in the vicinity of the scene too long.

By this time Hastings had succeeded in downing the last foeman who remained too obstinate for flight.

As in a dream he watched the dim panorama of scurrying horsemen, and heard the shots and shouts that proclaimed the rescue. It was almost incredible, this being snatched from death at the very last moment.

He leaned upon his rifle, the barrel of which was hot from repeated discharges, and panted for breath, while the excitable little professor, overwhelmed with joy, capered about like a boy, alternately shrieking "vive la France" and then in what was intended to be a deeper voice, "hurrah for old England."

Gradually the tumult died away, detonating shots no longer burst upon the startled ear, and even the terrified shouts of the scattered blacks melted in the distance.

The battle of the forest was over.

Rex, still leaning upon his gun, stood there waiting to meet his saviours.

Somehow a spark of fire had fallen among some dead leaves and twigs under the tree, so that a little blaze now leaped up.

Professor Jules had a weakness in the line of a fire, and eagerly tossed some fragments of branches on the blaze, which of course sprang up higher.

Toward this figure standing there, came one of the mounted rescuers, a man whose deep voice had rung out with a leonine roar as he urged his men to action.

Springing from his steed he advanced directly to Rex, who presented rather an heroic appearance, with

blood-streaked face and clothing showing the desperate conditions through which he had just passed.

As the firelight fell upon the features of the stalwart newcomer, Rex leaned forward to assure himself that he was not dreaming, and then found tongue to exclaim :

“Lord Bruno, by my life ! You came up in the nick of time, Waterford, just as we were about to go under.”

CHAPTER III.

LORD BRUNO'S COWBOYS.

THE Englishman stood rooted in his tracks, staring at the figure before him.

"Jove! I know that voice, but I'll wager your own mother would fail to recognize you with that bloody face. Yes, I have heard a voice like that, but it is incredible——"

"Not at all," declared Rex, cheerily, as he thrust out his hand.

"Rex Hastings! Gad! this is the biggest surprise of my life. Glad to see you—why, I couldn't be more so if it was a brother. But what under heaven are you doing up in this hot-bed of idolatry and fetish worship?" was what the other exclaimed as he wrung the proffered hand again and again, and even seemed tempted to indulge in a bear-like hug.

"You mean down in this country, for we have come from the north, over deserts, through the densest of forests, down rivers, fighting our way for months through the heart of Africa. I really began to believe our long pilgrimage was about to end right here, but a kind fate sent you in time. I could not have selected a more welcome saviour, had I been given the choice, than my old friend of the Quartier Latin in Paris, where we spent such happy days, sharing one another's troubles and pleasures."

"What! do you mean to tell me you two have made

this terrible journey alone?" gasped the other, surveying the professor with considerable respect, seeing which Jules immediately puffed out his chest with the pride of a true son of Gascony.

"Bless you, not at all. Our people numbered forty odd when we left the coast with the permission of the Sultan of Zanzibar, and struck into the wilderness."

"But—where the deuce are they now?"

"Gone, every mother's son of 'em. Many deserted from time to time, a few were killed, and others fell into the hands of the terrible head-hunters of the far interior. We lost our last man to-day, poor Friday, the one faithful fellow of the lot."

"But tell me, my dear fellow, what sort of an expedition did you engineer? It is plain to be seen this gentleman is a man of science"—for the professor was eagerly endeavoring to discover what damage had been done to his specimens—"but unless you have developed the mania since we parted, my old artist friend Rex Hastings was hardly the man to endure the dangers and hardships of such a tremendous undertaking in a search for specimens."

Hastings glanced around after the manner of a man who would not care to have his secret heard by other ears than those for which it was intended.

"You shall know all, Bruno, but not now, not here. It is as amazing a story as ever a Rider Haggard dreamed. It will thrill you to hear it in detail. Wait for a more fitting opportunity. The idea has suddenly flashed into my mind that there may be something more than accident in this singular meeting of two old art chums in the depth of a South African forest—that it means destiny—that perhaps you too may be en-

thused by the wonderful story I shall presently spin, and catching some of the inspiration that has urged me to undertake such an apparently wild-goose chase, combine your forces with mine for success."

"Jove! you arouse my keenest curiosity, my dear fellow. Take pity on my well-known impetuosity, and don't let many hours elapse before you raise the veil and allow me a peep at the mystery."

"I promise you, Bruno. But on my part I too am consumed with curiosity concerning your presence here. What are you doing in this savage country, and who are these dashing, long-haired fellows, speeding about on their horses like actual Centaurs?"

The Englishman laughed—there was something very jolly in that laugh of his, and it won him friends wherever he roamed, since men of every nation love a genial nature.

"Look again—what manner of men would you take them to be, my Rex?"

Hastings observed a couple of the riders who chanced to be close enough to receive some benefit from the professor's fire.

"Well," he said, slowly, "if we were over in the States instead of thousands of miles away from America, I should have no hesitation in pronouncing them genuine cowboys, such as our Western plains produce."

"Straight to the bull's-eye, that shot. They are cowboys, and two have even taken part in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Exhibition when he showed at Earle's Court in London. They naturally drifted to South Africa as the latest field for adventure. They are now *under contract with me*. You see I'm about to inaug-

urate a little Wild West of my own, and show these black fellows a trick or two that will open their eyes.

“Seriously speaking, Rex, they are in my employ. You know my penchant of old. I am an artist above everything. England is at present all agog over the state of affairs in Africa—an advance up the Nile has been ordered. I would like to have been with Tommy Atkins in that adventure, but the expedition is well supplied with artists and correspondents, even including our friend Conan Doyle. It is not so here. Ever since Jameson’s raid, the eyes of the world have been upon the land of Paul Kruger, and now that the Matabele are upon the warpath the situation has become more intense than ever.

“I have resolved to learn certain facts with relation to the country and the people in this region, so that the English public may be better informed as to what a gigantic task lies before the success of their arms.”

“And you take your life in your hands to invade this dangerous territory in order to dash off sketches of Matabele kraals, of the savage impis engaged in the horrible war dance, togged out in all their fantastic finery, and perhaps you even hope to draw a picture of their bloody war god, the terrible M’limo, ‘the Great, Great One, Calf of the Black Bull, the Black Elephant who shakes the earth with his stamping, the Founder of Nations,’ as they call him.”

Lord Bruno’s cheery face assumed an eager expression, but with a mournful sigh he shook his head in the negative.

“Oh, I fear that would be too overpowering for a chap of my size. Besides, unless I am mistaken, *another has undertaken the task of ridding the earth*

of that vile monster. You shall hear more about Frederick Burnham and his mission later. As to the rest I must plead guilty. I have sketched the Matabele under every condition, and even if I do say it myself, there are picturesque points about the rascal that please an artist's eye. The sight of a group of them decked in all their panoply of tiger skins and gaudy feathers, dancing in a circle in the most grotesque manner, and to the hollow beating of those monotonous tom-toms is a spectacle once seen never forgotten—a sight to conjure with. But you are wounded, my dear fellow," he said, suddenly.

"Not seriously, I believe."

"Nevertheless you need attention. I have a man here who is a master hand at that sort of thing—a man whom nature made a physician, but whom a restless desire for the freedom of the prairies with a blue canopy overhead caused to become a cowboy."

With that Lord Bruno raised his voice and called :

"I say, doctor, will you come here, please?"

One of the two men on horseback leaped to the ground and approached. He was decked in the full regalia of a "cow puncher," and even had the peculiar swagger so natural to the daring spirits who spend half of their lives in mad chases across country after stampeding cattle, or rounding up stray "mavericks" that await a brand.

Hastings fancied him on sight and the introduction was marked by a hearty hand-shake, for after discovering what execution the men at bay had accomplished among the assegai throwers, the doctor felt an uncommon interest in the hero who could toss lead with such glorious results; nor was his admiration any the less

keen when he discovered that an old time friendship had existed between Rex and his employer.

He agreed with Hastings after a superficial examination, that the wounds which the professor and himself had received were none of them at all serious, and marveled greatly that they had come out almost unscathed from the shower of missiles rained upon the spot by the advancing circle of blacks.

The others now drew near, and Lord Bruno signaled them to approach.

Hastings was delighted to meet them. It seemed like a great treat to look into their faces, and hear English spoken again, even if it was in some sense murdered by Western idioms, for except the dulcet notes of the professor, he had not heard a voice speak in the mother tongue for over three months.

The first to come was Jim Bludsoe, the leader of the little band, a wiry, bronzed man with the eye of a hawk, and a manner that told of a long life spent upon the border. He was almost a counterpart of Cody himself, and Hastings felt that such a daring spirit must necessarily leave his mark upon the land wherein he roved.

Next came a rough and ready genius, whose impetuous manner might be expected to get him into many a scrape. His tresses were inclined to be a dark auburn, so that the origin of "Red" Eric was readily discerned.

The last of the lot probably interested Rex in a peculiar manner, since he did not appear to be more than a boy. Little Phil they called him. When introduced he seemed uneasy and let his eyes fall to the ground—glorious black eyes they were too. Rex could not but notice them, and the slight figure of the lad.

"I think he is rather delicate for such work as this,"

he said aside to the Briton, after the four had retired to some little distance.

"I had the same impression, but having given my word to—er—a member of his family, I could not back out. And Little Phil has astonished us all with his endurance and grit. Nothing daunts him. He is ever eager to serve me, and often anticipates my wishes. I have already grown to think much of the boy. Taken collectively I have about the sturdiest little band of rangers ever let loose upon the Matabele. But let us leave this place. It would hardly do for a camp or *laager*, with all these ghastly evidences of warfare. I believe Bludsoe has an ideal spot in his mind, which we were about to settle upon when we heard the rattle of your hot fire and the war whoops of the blacks."

"Is it very far—because we have no horses, you know, our expedition having been on foot?"

"The luckiest thing in the world—thanks to Red Eric's suggestion we have a couple of extra animals. Why, things just seem to dovetail together, as it were. Wait until I get them here, and you shall no longer be without a mount. In this open country horses are of some use, whereas up in the tangle through which you blazed a path the beasts could never get on."

This was speedily arranged, and Professor Jules saw with no little pleasure every one of his thirteen packages strapped on the back of his steed ere he consented to clamber up among them.

As the little cavalcade moved away, with Bludsoe the scout in the advance, and Red Eric ranging on one quarter while the doctor looked after the other, the *professor found himself alongside Little Phil, whom he drew into a desultory conversation.*

Lord Bruno and Rex brought up the rear, and each again expressed his delight at this remarkable meeting under such extraordinary conditions.

"It is certainly something beyond the realms of chance that brought it about," declared the artist with positive determination in his voice.

"Who knows?" responded his companion, as he thought of the fabulous treasure of the extinct volcano, and his recent desire to find a comrade who would join him in a second attempt to wrest it from the secret cache where it had lain useless for ages.

"You have come down through a country I have longed to see, a country that for many moons has held a charm for me such as no other portion of Africa possesses," continued Lord Bruno, who evidently had something on his mind.

"Indeed, you surprise me. Any information I can give you I shall be most happy to supply. Truth to tell, ever since you dawned upon my vision I have been hugging myself with the hope that I might influence you to go back with me and secure that which slipped my fingers by the closest of margins."

"Count it done even before you tell me the nature of your secret mission. I am like a wandering Knight, seeking adventure, only I work in the interest of art, and not to gain the favor of a lady love. Bend your head a little this way, Hastings. I told you I was scouring the country to sketch the wild Matabele, and his allies, the savage Makalakas, on the warpath, in their kraals, at the feast, in the council, anywhere and under the oddest conditions. My dear fellow, all that is really true, but it is only a blind to cover my real purpose, which is to penetrate the interior, trace cer-

tain rumors to their source and discover some one who has set eyes upon the fair white god of the Zambodi."

Hastings uttered an involuntary cry.

"Good Heavens! how remarkable!" he muttered.

"Why do you say that?" demanded his companion looking at him with a sudden eager anticipation.

"Because your wish dear Bruno, is already granted, since these eyes have rested on the beautiful face of the Light of Africa—yes, I myself have seen this white idol."

CHAPTER IV.**THREE MONTHS IN TANGLE AND DESERT.**

LORD BRUNO appeared to be strangely affected upon hearing this startling announcement from his companion.

His face lighted up with an eager expression that naturally enough aroused the curiosity of Hastings; nor were the words he let fall calculated to lessen this feeling.

“Something told me there was more than mere accident in this meeting, Rex; and already I can see the hand of destiny guiding us. Yes, I imagine we shall get on famously together. Of that, more anon.”

They had left behind them the scene of the desperate encounter, with all its hideous accompaniments, which would doubtless haunt Rex for many a day; although by this time he was growing accustomed to pictures of violence, since their long trail through the depth of the African forest and desert had been marked in many places by sanguinary conflicts, where the ugly nature of the native tribes refused friendly overtures, and forced a meeting that resulted in pitched battle.

In many cases these blacks were so ugly in appearance, and with such barbarian manners and customs that one could hardly believe them human beings at all; indeed, the travelers were more apt to liken them to some family of monster apes, for like the gorilla they lived in the tree tops.

Familiarity usually breeds contempt, and in this case the continued fighting that fell to their share made soldiers out of an erstwhile art student and scientist.

Heavier grew the shadows, as night closed her sable mantle over the forest. Bludsoe evidently knew just where he was heading, for he possessed the remarkable acumen for which American frontiersmen have always been noted. The signs of forest and stream were as familiar to him as the mariner's compass to the sailor, and from mountain and plain the voices of nature whispered her eternal secrets in his ear. It were useless to ask him why certain things were so—he could only tell you that he was as sure of it as that he lived.

There was no encounter with the enemy, no warning shot from either vanguard or those upon the flanks.

Evidently the Makalakas had been utterly demoralized by the sudden swoop of Bruno and his cowboy band, and believed the forces of the feared wizard of South Africa, Cecil Rhodes, had been turned loose upon them.

As the country was swarming with hostiles it would be poor policy to remain long in the one spot.

Even Lord Bruno knew this, and Jim Bludsoe would surely advise against it, though there was really nothing to prevent their stopping a few hours in order to cook supper and recuperate.

The twilight had rendered objects very uncertain by the time a whistle from the leader warned them he had arrived close to the spot which would serve them as a temporary *laager*, or camp.

Here the offshoots of the hills, known as *kopjes*, dwindled down to a rough country, in which it were an

easy task to find some basin where a small fire might be lighted with but a trifling chance of discovery.

Bludsoe's unerring judgment had marked out such a place, and straight as the crow flies he led them to it.

Presently a cheery scene was presented in a little "dip" back of the first roll, where a camp-fire burned, horses were staked out as on the plains, to nibble at the grass, and the doctor busied himself in preparing supper, for besides being able to minister to the wants of tortured flesh, this remarkable man was a *chef* of no mean calibre, and could tickle the palates of his fellows with savory dishes, which, if they lacked the elegance of a Delmonico concoction, were certainly unrivaled in the estimation of those who partook.

Bludsoe was looking after the horses, and doing numerous chores about the camp. The other two members of Lord Bruno's little band appeared to have vanished into thin air. Hastings had only to glance in the direction of a tree that marked the rise in front, to catch a glimpse of a small fiery spot which he knew was the end of a cigar Red Eric smoked while standing on guard. Little Phil occupied another coign of advantage near by. Evidently Bludsoe was not the man to be caught napping.

"Come," said the artist, as he threw himself at full length upon a blanket at some little distance from the fire, "suppose you occupy that place, Rex. We have some twenty minutes to spare before supper will be ready. Your friend is busy with his specimens, packing them up more securely for some purpose or other. I confess that I am frightfully eager to hear this amazing yarn of yours. Will you relieve my curiosity, my dear fellow?"

Hastings laughed as he accepted the seat, and hugged his knees.

"Twenty minutes would hardly be enough in which to tell you a tenth of the whole story, so I shall only relate that part beginning with my leaving Zanzibar and striking into the wilderness."

"Good!" said the Briton, nodding eagerly.

"I must in a measure explain the motive that influenced my action. It was no desire to emulate Stanley or even my friend Chandler—I did not seek to undertake these frightful dangers in the interest of art, such as might influence an enthusiast like yourself, nor did the eager desire of the professor to discover new wonders in the field of science that might cause untold millions unborn to rise up in ages to come and call him blessed, have any particular weight with me.

"Plainly, then, my dear Bruno, I am a rude, uncouth treasure seeker—a Cortez or Pizarro transferred to this heart of the Dark Continent. I sought a fortune, a will-o'-the-wisp that had eluded many an eager hand before. I have been so close to it that here is one of the gems which await the bold adventurer daring enough to invade the spirit-guarded temple in the hollow of the extinct volcano, called by the natives Krokato."

He held out his hand and deposited something in the palm of the artist—something that glowed in the sparkling firelight like a gleaming drop of liquid fire, or a crystal of blood.

No wonder Lord Bruno uttered an exclamation as his eyes rested upon this priceless ruby. He had never seen its peer, rudely cut though it was by some native lapidary of a past age.

"Jove! if that be a sample of the treasure trove I

don't wonder you are ready to undertake unlimited dangers in order to secure it. Really, I shall take some stock in King Solomon's Mines after this. The romancer had a foundation for his wonderful tale. That stone is worth a snug sum of guinea gold, I tell you. But pray proceed."

"At some other time I will tell you how and when and where I learned about this wonder treasure that has lain buried in the depths for ages. You remember the story of Edmond Dantes in Monte Cristo, and under what peculiar conditions he learned of the hiding place of the vast wealth accumulated on the island in the Mediterranean—well, I believe that in one sense my experience was almost as singular as his. But you shall judge yourself at some future time.

"Our journey was anything but peaceful. It started under favorable auspices, but ere a week had passed we found ourselves in hot water. I believe a wave of fanaticism has swept over Africa from the region of the Nile and the Kingdom of Dahomey down to the very borders of Matabele land.

"At any rate we found the blacks aggressive all through our trip. At times I actually had reason to suspect that these tribes of interior Africa were really united in some ancient league, and recognized in the white man the coming doom of their race, for at some future date, as surely as the world continues to exist, that restless, colonizing Anglo-Saxon race is bound to dominate Africa even as it does North America, Australia and many other quarters of the globe.

"Well, we were in a position to offer either the olive branch or war to the knife, and when the aggressive

tactics of the blacks forced us to the latter condition, you can believe we hit hard.

“Still, the continual dripping of water will wear away a stone, and this constant system of warfare began to tell upon our organization.

“We lost some men in battle, others deserted, stealing what they could, and by degrees, our condition began to grow desperate.

“I am not made of putty, however, and never once thought of relinquishing my plans, for the idea of possessing this argosy had become the one scheme of my life—you know a man may find himself so wrapped up in a certain matter that he fairly dreams of it.

“Time will not allow me to tell you what we experienced—how many dangers we escaped, and how bravely my men stood up against the flight of poisoned arrows sent among us by a tribe of such demon-like blacks that I called them the Jabberwocks.

“Reduced to half a dozen we came at length to the country of my dream—my yearning inspiration. It had been so impressed on my mind that I seemed to recognize every feature of the landscape, and I assure you this fact gave me a peculiar sensation, since it seemed to add a positive assurance with respect to the existence of the fabulous mine.

“It was not my intention to take a single member of the expedition into my confidence, outside the professor.

“Our carriers and guards had no idea but that Monsieur Jules was the real head of the traveling show, and that I had accompanied him in a spirit of pure adventure, coupled with a desire to shoot big game.

“Hence, I did not find it difficult to steal away from

our camp one night, gun in hand, and head for the quarter where I believed the secret *cache* might be found.

"I found it, you see, and came within an ace of leaving my bones in the depths of that strange ruin, the remnant of what must have been a temple ages ago, dedicated to the sun possibly, since I have found evidences that there were fire worshippers in the heart of Africa, as well as among the ancient Peruvians and the Aztecs of Mexico; but wait until you see that remarkable crater temple yourself.

"When I fled from the scene, after a desperate encounter with some gigantic blacks who appeared to guard the sacred valley, my intention was to get away as speedily as possible, dispose of this jewel in Johannesburg or Cape Town, and organize a new expedition prepared to cope with the tremendous difficulties which I had found must be surmounted if success were ever to perch upon my flag.

"Our proper course should have been to have immediately left that dangerous region; but the professor had conceived an idea, and being as stubborn as a mule, he was bound to have his way, danger or not.

"In brief, he had discovered a large *kraal* against the side of the mountain, a town that seemed to be many times larger than anything he had as yet run across, besides presenting possibilities that were especially alluring to such a devoted son of science.

"To make a long story short, then, I reluctantly agreed to accompany him, knowing by experience that this was the quickest method of inducing him leave the hostile region, for it had by this time become a question as to whether we would ever live to reach civiliza-

tion again, so numerous were the difficulties that beset us.

“We started out immediately, having cautioned our few remaining men to remain in hiding. I may as well mention just here that when we reached our rendezvous again all of them had decamped with the plunder, save faithful Friday; but since his specimens remained safe, Monsieur Jules never worried.

“I knew from the lay of the land that it was our policy to ascend the hill, since, by taking a circuitous course we could reach a point where the whole great village of conical huts would be spread before us in the moonlight.

“This we managed to accomplish, and upon crawling around the loose rocks found that my shrewd supposition was very accurate, since we overlooked the entire *kraal*.

“We were immediately startled by the fact that a tremendous commotion seemed to have swept over the place. From our elevated position we could see a dense mass of kneeling blacks in the open space at the foot of the cliff, and the low murmur of a chant which had struck our ears upon rounding the side of the hill, now burst into a most amazing chorus, that rose and fell like the waves of the ocean.

“I was at first alarmed, believing that our presence had become known, and had something to do with this terrible spectacle; but the professor assured me it was only some part of their fetish worship, and begged me not to think of leaving, since he was bound to see it through, come what would.

“So we crouched there, and peeped through crevices in the rocks at the multitude of devout worshippers below.

“I tell you, Bruno, I never experienced anything equal to it—that chant so weird, so uncanny in its sudden outbursts, coming from the throats of hundreds of the most densely ignorant negroes in all Africa—the expectancy with which they crouched there and looked upward—all these things gave me an eyrie sensation I do not ever remember experiencing before in all my life.

“Then I began to wonder what they could be looking for up on the face of that cliff—surely they awaited no dawning of the sun—could it be they worshipped the quarter whence he had vanished that evening in a golden splendor I have never seen equaled outside of Venice and in Florida? It would only be carrying out the same idea as the true Mussulman who says his prayers five times a day with his face always turned toward the sacred city of Mecca.

“Then I conceived another notion—possibly in some niche along the face of the cliff the hideous voodoo idol they worshipped had a resting place.

“Eagerly I sought to discover it, but although my eyes alighted upon a little platform or ledge half-way up, where the silvery moonbeams played in undisturbed splendor, I could discover no trace of an idol or figure of any sort.

“Again I turned my attention upon the great mass of superstition-ridden blacks groveling upon the plain. They seemed convulsed, as with one mind they sprang to their feet, waved their arms wildly aloft, and gave vent to a fearful shout that went rolling down along the line of *kopjes* like thunder.

“A fearful suspicion flashed into my head that they had discovered us—that presently they must be swarm-

ing around the side of the hill bent upon cutting off our escape ; and the very thought of falling into the hands of those black fiends was enough to send a shudder through the stoutest heart.

“ Hardly had I conceived this startling idea, than I noticed with increasing amazement that to a man the *impis* had again cast themselves upon their faces as if in reverential awe.

“ At the same instant the professor plucked my arm, and made a motion for me to look up, which I of course immediately did.

“ The little moon-bathed ledge was the spot toward which my attention was attracted as if by some instinct.

“ It was no longer vacant.

“ I held my breath for very awe—at that moment, so great was my stupefaction that I could not have moved hand or foot even though the choice of life and death hung upon such action on my part ; for as I looked, my eyes beheld what appeared to be a beautiful angel in white, standing on the edge of the platform with hand upraised—and then and there I knew the vague travelers’ stories I had heard about the fair white god of the Zambodi were true.”

CHAPTER V.

THE SONG OF THE SIREN.

LORD BRUNO had hung upon the words of his companion with the most intense interest, and at this crisis in the narrative he too came to a sitting posture and breathlessly awaited the finish.

“To describe her would be a task beyond my powers. All I can declare in my feeble way is that as she burst upon my vision, bathed in a halo of moonlight, she was a glorious object for an artist’s dream. You and I have painted such subjects as angels, my dear fellow—we have seen such faces in visions, but rarely if ever, elsewhere.

“The magnetic influence of the scene was upon me—I felt enthralled, as though under a spell. There was a subtle witchery in the very atmosphere, that seemed to bind my senses, and all I could do was to crouch there and worship that beautiful being very much as the ignorant Africans were doing in their own savage manner.”

Lord Bruno nodded his head again.

“I understand it all, and sympathize with you. But tell me, Rex, did this white goddess have golden hair or raven locks—I am not asking from simple curiosity—it is a matter of the deepest importance to me?”

“Her hair fell over her shoulders in a mass like spun gold—that was what gave her appearance such a startling effect, and I have no doubt has much to do with *the fact of her being worshipped there as an idol.*”

"Tell me truly, my friend, was she anything like the face in this locket?" asked the English artist, with trembling voice.

Rex began to realize that the motive of his companion was a serious one. He had hardly let his eyes rest upon the features painted with the skill of a genius upon the ivory tablet than he gave utterance to an exclamation. Lord Bruno caught his arm.

"For God's sake tell me quickly," he breathed.

"It is very, very similar, and brings back vividly to my mind the picture that chained my attention there among the African hills. Yes, I would even dare venture to say this is the portrait of the fair being whom those black warriors sought favor from ere starting upon the warpath—yet that is incredible—impossible, since I have seen you wear this locket for years."

He looked at the Englishman in a thoughtful way, as though endeavoring to solve the riddle which had presented itself.

Lord Bruno again fastened it to his chain.

"You will be surprised my boy, when I tell you this miniature is a portrait of one who was very dear to me—of my sainted mother, taken when she was a charming girl, the fairest in all the county. Yes, there is a sad story back of it all. You shall hear it in good time, but this is no place to uncover the family skeleton. At least you know why I have conceived such a deep interest in this angel of the wilderness—why I am determined to see her face to face and set at rest certain suspicions that have arisen of late to disturb my mind. It is not a story one loves to dwell upon, Rex, but you are my friend, my brother I had almost said, and in

good time you shall hear all. Until then withhold your judgment I beg. Now finish telling me what occurred on the night you saw the white god appear to the Zambodi."

So Hastings went on.

"As she stood there upon the ledge, she suddenly raised her voice and sang. Heavens! such a voice, Bruno—I have heard Patti and many queens of song, but they never filled me with the satisfaction, the sense of ecstatic delight that crept over my very soul then.

"Perhaps the remarkable surroundings had something to do with it, for you must confess every element of the romantic was present.

"And what do you think she sang—'Home, Sweet Home.' It affected me weirdly. I seemed to realize that here was a bird caged against her will and fluttering her poor wings against the cruel bars, haunted perhaps by the memory of days far back in the dim past.

"I remember looking down to see what effect Payne's famous melody had upon the assembled blacks, for you know they say 'music hath charms to soothe the savage breast'; and sure enough the whole vast assemblage seemed swayed and awed as I have never seen an audience moved before.

"Then suddenly the plaintive air gave place to a weird melody—to words that were foreign to my ear but to which the professor listened eagerly—you see he knows a smattering of nearly every tongue spoken since Babel was erected.

"Later he told me it was a war chant, a sort of barbaric incantation as it were, calculated to work upon the feelings of the warriors, and arouse them to a feverish state, preparatory to advancing upon some foe.

“The effect upon the *impis* was amazing. They no longer knelt or remained prostrate in mute adoration, but leaping to their feet began to flourish weapons and great oval shields, to shout, shriek and sing, and in a minute the plain was covered with a mass of whirling, whooping blacks, eager to emulate the daring deeds of their ancestors, as pictured in the battle song.

“In the midst of the racket I looked up again and saw the fair goddess looking directly at the spot where the professor and myself crouched.

“Probably it was the height of recklessness, but I confess I never stopped to consider that—something impelled me to half rise and make a motion toward her. Whether my action had the effect of frightening her or not, she vanished from view, and I saw her no more; but I am positive her gaze fell upon me, and that she knows white men were in the neighborhood of the *kraal*.

“Who she is, and what strange fortune has caused her to be worshipped by these savage barbarians—these are grave questions that have been upon my mind ever since, and even before I met you, as I have said, my determination was taken to return again to this strange land of the *Zambodi*, and at the risk of my life if need be, endeavor to gain an interview with this charming goddess.”

“I applaud your resolution, Rex, and give you my word you shall be well backed up in your undertaking. We'll introduce a few American up-to-date methods among these tribes of the African wilds, and see what the result may be. Now tell me what followed.”

“Well, it's been hot enough ever since. We managed to get away from the vicinity of the *kraal* all

right, but fortune wearied of smiling and began to frown.

“Presently the unhappy discovery was made that but one man remained of all our band of helpers. Then we ran into a marauding regiment of blacks and had to fight for it. Each hour since that time has been fraught with new anxieties, until it seemed finally that the end had come. You found us battling for our lives. We fought in grim despair, resolved to die hard, as every true descendant of Anglo-Saxon blood should do. Further words are needless, since you were on the spot in person, and your good right hand had a share in clearing the field.

“Briefly, that is all. You will admit that it was a singular fortune that gave me a privilege that few other men of our race have enjoyed—that of actually resting my eyes upon the mystic worship of these barbarian *impis*, and on the dazzling face of their fair god.”

“Yes, you have been indeed favored. From what you say, the girl speaks English, since you heard her sing that grand old song.”

“Yes, yes, and even distinguished the words. Her whole soul was in them, and her pronunciation as perfect as yours, or mine.”

“Ah! there is the doctor beckoning. Supper is ready. Come, we will eat. It must refresh you after what has passed. Then we shall have to decide upon our plan of action. Much depends upon your condition.”

“I’m tough enough to stand it, and the golden opportunity is too good to be lost. You can count upon me as in favor of an immediate advance upon the enemy.”

Rex had no idea he was hungry until he started in.

Their own meals of late had been so meagre that this put new vim into him. He brushed aside unpleasant memories of recent experiences, and remembered only his resolve to again see the white girl whom these superstitious blacks had set above them as an idol, a god to worship; and who swayed their minds with the magic of song.

When they had finished the meal, Lord Bruno conferred with Bludsoe, who motioned to the doctor, after which they walked out to relieve the sentries.

These coming in a few minutes later, Red Eric spoke a few words to his employer.

"Come with me, Rex," said the latter rising, "Bludsoe wants us up yonder."

Ascending the rise they reached the spot where the athletic cowboy leaned against the lone tree, and smoked his pipe.

"What's in the wind?" asked Bruno, as they drew up beside the statue.

Thereupon Bludsoe waved his hand in a semicircle, with not a little of the natural dramatic spirit found in forceful, decisive characters untrammelled by the false restrictions of society.

"Look yonder, and there and there. Those lights you see are signal fires of these black heathen. There's a method in the way they burn, and I'm dead sure they're war blazes, intended to gather a great force of the warriors in this region; so the sooner we skip, the better for our health, Lord Bruno," was the startling announcement he so calmly made.

CHAPTER VI.

DR. JAMESON'S RIDE, AND THE SIEGE OF BULUWAYO.

THEIR preparations for a change of base did not consume much time, since the company of adventurers might be said to be in light marching order.

It was really the remarkable man of science who delayed their departure. The professor found himself in a quandary, since he dared not attempt to advance in the direction of Buluwayo alone, and could not venture back into the heart of the enemy's country carrying the accumulated mass of specimens with which he had burdened himself.

A happy compromise was suggested, of which he hastened to avail himself.

Near by there chanced to be a cleft in the rocks, where possibly at some time in the remote past a wild beast had made his lair. Into this receptacle the scientist dragged his bundles, and snugly deposited them, marking the spot so that he might find it again, provided he lived through the dangers that lay in wait for them in the African wilds—dangers more real, more terrible than the Scylla and Charybdis of the ancient mariners.

Jim Bludsoe took command.

Possibly he was to a certain extent in the confidence of his employer—at any rate they held frequent whispered consultations, and by degrees Hastings was induced to relate that portion of his story concerning the

appearance of the white god to the cowboy, whose interest seemed to be at once aroused.

They rode cautiously toward the north, and gradually lost sight of the Makalaka signal fires.

Rex had already taken quite a fancy to this Buffalo Bill of the African wilds, in whom he recognized a man of great determination of character, a king among scouts.

Bludsoe was not a boaster, but had a good command of language, being able to paint a striking scene in words with as much power as an artist might employ in manipulating his brush. To but few is given this talent to describe a scene so that it rises before the mental vision with all the charm of a picture.

A few words casually dropped informed Rex that Bludsoe had been one of that band of heroic souls who accompanied Jameson over the border into the land of the Boer.

After that he could not rest content until the ranger had given him a graphic description of the doctor's ride, the fearful battle in which such a harvest of death was reaped, and the final surrender, though Bludsoe confessed he was not present when this latter took place, having been charged with a desperate mission by "Doctor Jim," which he faithfully executed.

Following this came a brief but exceedingly graphic account of the attack on Buluwayo by the impis of the savage Matabele.

This town had previously been one of the headquarters of the renegade Zulus, who, having broken away from their parent stock, trekked far into the northward, subdued the Makalakas, and became a terror to the country; but when reverses fell upon them in 1894

with the defeat of King Lobengula, the capital had to be delivered over to the British.

In the month of May, 1896, only a few weeks previous to the meeting of Hastings with these remarkable characters, the Matabele had swarmed out of their fastnesses, incited to war by the high priest N'dubi who had assumed the identity of the wonderful black god M'limo so feared by all the tribes of South Africa.

Buluwayo had been besieged, the women and children, over a thousand in all, were shut up in the great wooden market-place, while the men defended them.

Desperate scenes took place, which must go down to posterity in the history of that era during which South Africa was redeemed from the darkness of fetish sway.

Those men were of the heroic order, and in those days when the cruel foe flung their compact masses against the thin line of defenders, each and every member of the little band fought with a valor that should win the Victoria Cross, remembering the innocent ones within the great shed, in whose service they were ready to die.

It was the siege of Lucknow over again, only instead of mutinous Sepoys the hordes of idolatrous Matabele flung their columns time and again upon the hollow square, through which they could not force a passage.

Death reaped a rich harvest, for the defenders were well armed, and heaps of the warriors, decked in their fantastic war dress, lay in spots where the terrible warfare had been most severe.

At last came succor, and never was the arrival of reinforcements more eagerly welcomed. No one heard the bagpipes in the distance as at Lucknow, where the glorious old refrain "The Campbells are Coming,"

reached the ears of the desperate defenders, reduced to the last extremity, and causing them to leap for the very madness of joy; but the crash of guns, the hearty English cheers, the shouts of savage dismay and the flight of the demoralized impis were quite as effective as the weird notes of the Scottish pibroch in telling the weary defenders of Buluwayo that all was well.

Hastings heard these things and pondered.

Evidently he realized that the most remarkable events for which the close of the nineteenth century would be noted, were destined to be enacted on South African soil.

Here was the theatre around which momentous results must cluster, results that interested the whole English-speaking world.

Yes, of a certainty the day had come for Africa's awakening, and the sleep of centuries was to be broken. As in America, as in India, as in Egypt and elsewhere, the glory of this achievement must in a great measure fall to the Anglo-Saxon race. Colonial methods as a general thing, save under the British and French flags, are harsh and cruel.

It is true, as a recent writer has said, "The British do not hesitate to wage unprovoked wars of conquest; but after they have obtained possession of a country they treat their subjects kindly. The natives of Natal, Zululand, Basutoland and other regions in South Africa are happy and contented. The natives of Swaziland sent a delegation to England to beg the Government to take them under its rule and protect them from the Boers. The Fellaheen of Egypt look upon the British as their benefactors, their saviours. And so it is everywhere. The Englishman calls the black man a 'nigger'

and regards him as his inferior; but he never forgets that the 'nigger' is, after all, a *man*, entitled to humane treatment. And so the subject races under British rule increase and multiply and thrive, and actually make some progress toward civilization.

"Far different is the state of affairs in 'colonies' under other flags. The horrors of Spanish rule in South America and the Indies are well known, as witness the barbarities attending the rebellion in Cuba as well as that in the Philippine Islands. For many years the Portuguese flag has been the chief shelter of the slave trade in South-Central Africa. The Dutch colonists, from the Cape to the Limpopo, have offered the natives no other choice than that between slavery and extermination. Of German rule in Africa the case of Carl Peters is a sample. Says a recent writer: 'In the Cameroons the Germans seem to have devoted their energies chiefly to the wholesale thrashing of natives, male and female, and to the repression of rebellions that have broken out in consequence of this conduct.' Naturally enough, the growth of these 'colonies' is slow. Germany has occupied Togoland, which is nearly half as large as New York State, for a dozen years, and yet its white population to-day comprises only seventy-nine Germans, six Frenchmen and three Englishmen. She has owned for the same time the Cameroons, a region as large as all the North Atlantic States and Virginia to boot, yet has there only one hundred and fifty-seven Germans, thirty-three Englishmen, seventeen Americans, fifteen Swedes and eight other white men. In German Southwest Africa, with an area twice that of all the North Atlantic States, the white population after twelve years is scarcely twelve hundred.

“The fact is the Anglo-Saxon seems to be the one great colonizing race. The Latins had the start of it in America, but it has immeasurably outstripped them. The Dutch and Portuguese were first in South Africa, but must now yield place to the British. France got the first grip upon India, but had to loosen it in favor of her island rival. New Zealand and Australia are other examples of the marvelous ability of this race in founding and developing new States. Men of other blood come in later, as they came to the United States by millions, and made admirable citizens; but the pioneers are of Anglo-Saxon origin.

“It is a strong, proud race, sometimes arrogant and domineering, but on the whole both just and generous. It has established in every quarter of the globe such an empire, political, commercial and intellectual, as no other in this or any day has ever dreamed of, covering six times the area of the Roman Empire at its greatest, and comprising one-third of the whole population of the globe. And with all this achieved, it is still so fresh and vigorous and full of vital energy that every would-be rival seems weak and decaying in comparison with it. It has played a great part in the history of the last century. It will dominate the doings of the century to come.”

Such were the thoughts of Hastings while he listened to the story of how the fierce Matabele had been driven back toward their strongholds of the Matoppo hills, now aflame with signal fires, and echoing with the hollow music of the war drum.

No wonder that men living in a country where such *events come to pass* find their opportunity to prove that *the age of heroes* has not yet gone—no wonder they

strive to emulate the many glorious examples set by Anglo-Saxon valor of past ages.

Destiny is at work, and nothing can stay the march of progress.

Only a few years must pass ere the traveler will find it possible to journey from the region of the Nile to the Cape of Good Hope without once leaving territory controlled by the sons of St. George; and that day will mark a new era in the history of the so-called Dark Continent, since the blackness of superstition must give way before the torch of civilization.

The little band rode on.

Sounds of the night came to their ears, sounds that were more indicative of life than the whisper of the wind among the tops of the forest trees.

Wild animals roamed through this region, and at intervals their voices could be heard in the distance as they sought for food.

Every man kept his rifle ready for immediate use, since there could be no telling when it might be needed.

Conversation had utterly ceased, only an occasional whisper being heard as Bludsoe conferred with Lord Bruno, or gave orders to his faithful fellows.

Professor Jules stood it like a stoic—small man that he was, he had spent so many years in an arduous chase after an elusive chimera *yclept* fame, that his system had in a measure become hardened, and he was thus enabled to withstand knocks which might have used up many a man apparently much stronger.

Hastings was for a time puzzled to account for his willingness to return, but finally believed he had alighted upon the true reason when he remembered a *chance meeting* that had occurred with a strange crea-

ture possessing a tail, and which in describing to Verdant he had declared possessed many of the attributes of a wild man.

Yes, the eager professor actually believed this might turn out to be the long sought "missing link" of Darwin's theory, and could he but make such a discovery his claim to a niche in the column of Fame was assured.

Thus, it will be seen that quite a variety of motives influenced the members of Lord Bruno's little expedition in making their way northward.

The bright stars swept on in their westward course—the moon hung suspended in the heavens almost as round as a silver cart wheel, being near her full.

How like an old friend she seems to travelers far distant, this guardian of the night that now hangs over them in South Africa, and in a few hours will smile upon their beloved nests in England or America. How many have fondly wished they could entrust fair Luna with a message to loved ones at home; but alas, the wizard of to-day has not yet arrived at a solution of this perplexing problem.

That same old moon has looked down upon all history from the time of Adam—wars and conquests have been carried on, the spread of civilization has girdled the earth, America from being the home of the savage has become the abiding place of teeming millions whose magic influence is for the benefit of mankind. And in ages to come the calm heavenly luminary will look down upon an earth that "blossoms like the rose," upon which superstition and idolatry and darkness have no place, and where war is no longer the dread arbiter of nations.

Hastings' ruminations were suddenly disturbed by a

sudden exclamation from Bludsoe, who at the same time drew in his horse.

"It is an hour past midnight—the beasts are tired, and we had better rest," said the scout.

Immediately the small detachment of venturesome spirits went into camp. Every man appeared to know just what duty was assigned to him, such was the remarkable accuracy with which Bludsoe had inculcated his ideas among his followers.

In ten minutes after the word to halt was given, the little *laager* presented an appearance of peacefulness and rest. Horses had been hobbled, sentries posted, and the remainder of the band lay upon the ground wooing the gentle goddess of slumber.

Hastings had endured many discomforts during the last three months, and to feel a saddle under his head for a pillow, with a warm blanket between his body and the chill night air were luxuries rather than otherwise. Hence, it was not the lack of comforts to which he had become accustomed that caused him, weary as he was, to lie there and stare up at the yellow moon, glimpses of which could be seen through the branches of the trees.

Nor did thoughts of the marvelous treasure-trove of which he had come within an ace of being possessed, have aught to do with his wakefulness.

Between his eyes and the magic orb of the moon there came in imagination the face of the fair god of the Zambodi. Again he was staring at her as she waved her white arms and sang—again in imagination he could see the spellbound impis crouching on the plain below, groveling and worshipping this angel of light who seemed to sway their destinies.

Who was she—what was she—how came such a lovely being in the midst of these savage and merciless blacks—what connection had her past life history with that of his artist friend Lord Bruno?

These were the questions that rioted through his brain and baffled his efforts to obtain sleep. Again he seemed to feel the mystic influence of her wonderful presence; again he experienced that overpowering determination to learn more of her history, and assist her to escape from confinement if, as he suspected, she proved to be a prisoner even while a god.

Over the hills in the west the moon hovered ere Rex Hastings' thoughts became an incoherent jumble, and he finally drifted away in the boat of the dream king.

There may have come to him while he slept visions of that same charming face which seemed destined to have such an influence over his whole future; but we draw the limit of our powers of divination at dreams, so that his secret must remain such.

CHAPTER VII.

MONSIEUR JULES AND THE "MISSING LINK."

THERE was no stirring *reveille* to arouse the occupants of the little camp in the heart of the enemy's country, no beating of drums or blowing of cavalry bugles such as might have marked the hour for rising in a military *laager*.

Instead, a hand touched the face of Rex, who opened his eyes to find the sun up, a small smokeless fire blazing in a cleft, an aroma of coffee in the air, and his friend Lord Bruno bending over him.

"Breakfast is about ready, Rex. Just give you time to dash some water in your face from the little brook yonder. This may be the last cooked meal we shall have for some days, so we'll make the most of it."

It did taste remarkably fine. Rex hardly realized how much he had missed the luxury of a hot cup of coffee until given the opportunity to indulge. They chatted over the meal, and laid all manner of plans, which no doubt would undergo the ordinary metamorphosis consequent upon the shifting surrounding conditions.

They were in no hurry to leave their present camp, since a further advance could only be made in safety under cover of darkness, owing to the danger of discovery.

Through the morning they lounged about.

The sentries were repeatedly changed, and taking advantage of the chance presented, Rex and Lord

Bruno clambered up the side of a steep elevation near by, from the top of which they hoped to have a view of the surrounding country, which would aid Hastings in his effort to locate the situation of the great kraal, upon which he and the professor had looked at the time of the white god's appearance.

The view amply repaid them for their effort, since they were able to mark out their future course.

Smoke attracted their attention in several quarters, but Lord Bruno declared these were signals of the blacks, it being a favorite method of passing communications around.

Whether these smoke columns had anything to do with their presence in the neighborhood was a question they could not solve, nor would Jim Bludsoe have been any better able to have read the secret in those spirals that crept into the ambient atmosphere from various hilltop signal stations.

Having accomplished all that was possible the two friends commenced the descent, which was more of a task than the climb had been. Lord Bruno had, at the suggestion of Bludsoe, carried a lasso, without which no respectable cowboy would ever mount a horse.

This rope came in useful enough on several occasions, when it was doubled over the outcropping limb of a tree, and allowed the two adventurers an opportunity to reach the foot of an abrupt descent.

Thus they arrived at the base of the hill, and entered the dense stretch of forest.

Game abounded on all sides, and but for the dangerous conditions that rendered the discharge of a rifle especially hazardous, the temptation to use their weapons must have proven irresistible.

It was while they were advancing in the direction of the secret camp that the Englishman suddenly clutched the arm of his companion, and pointed to the left, as though he had discovered that which demanded immediate attention.

Rex turned his eyes in that quarter, fully expecting to see one or more black warriors in all the regalia of savage war dress, stealing along to cut off their passage to the camp.

Indeed, he instinctively half raised his rifle as though in readiness to open the ball, knowing what advantage accrues to the party taking the initiative in such affairs ; but he did not fire. Instead, a broad smile flashed over his face, as though the spectacle might be of the humorous order.

The professor was in it, very much so, for at that moment there seemed to be a tug of war on the part of a large monkey and himself, between whom a rope was stretched, and the chances were apparently in favor of the gentleman of the African woods.

Rex comprehended the truth as soon as he grasped the situation. Monsieur Jules, still harping upon the possibility of fame awaiting him in the wilderness, and perhaps in hopes of running across a specimen of the "missing link," had borrowed a lasso, and wandered forth for a little stroll in the interests of science.

How in the name of all that was wonderful he had ever managed to cast that noose over the shoulders of the big monkey was a mystery that could never be explained ; but he had done so, and doubtless started for camp, intending to examine his capture at his leisure, and determine whether it had any claims on science or merely represented a type of animal life.

The beast, however, strenuously objected to such summary proceedings. Possibly he remembered an appointment made with a dusky belle of the wildwood about this time, and concluded to start for the rendezvous.

Be that as it may, at the moment our comrades burst upon the scene the man of science, who had rashly fastened the other end of the lasso around his body, was engaged in a tremendous struggle to hold his own against the giant monkey, and being slowly but surely dragged into the depth of the woods where the beast doubtless had its home, though Jules contested every foot of ground, and strained and tugged as he planted his heels against each projecting root, all to no avail.

What the ultimate result of the tug of war might have been but for the coming of the twain upon the scene, must be left entirely to conjecture. Whether the plucky little scientist would have eventually succeeded in securing the mastery, or, finding himself being dragged at the heels of the monkey be compelled in self-defense to cut loose with his knife, must remain a mystery.

At the appearance of our friends the animal redoubled his efforts, and poor Jules was tossed about like an adventurous thistle-down.

When Bruno managed to lay hold of the rope, a new element entered the game, and the beast's defeat was settled.

Jules was released, and his end of the lasso fastened to a tree. Then an advance was made from several quarters, but the beast looked so fierce in his despair, that, being debarred from using their guns, they were compelled to resort to strategy in order to accomplish his downfall.

Retreating before them the beast gradually shortened his circuit and wound himself up until he was powerless to resist and fell an easy prey to their combined assault.

As the gentleman of science had ere this made up his mind he did not want the monkey half as much as he had thought, when the lasso had been recovered they allowed the brute a chance to shuffle off, which he did with the most frightful grimaces and chattering, as though invoking the curse of the great voodoo of the monkey race upon their heads on account of the indignities he had endured.

It was now high noon, and all seemed well.

A few hours more and they would feel at liberty to abandon the little camp, and push on in the direction which Rex had marked as their course.

Lord Bruno was met by the chief of the cowboys upon their return, and heard his report. It was to the effect that several bands of moving impis had been seen by the sentries while our friends were away upon their expedition, but though their garb indicated that they were upon the warpath rather than engaged in a simple hunting expedition, they had not come close enough to detect any signs of the invaders.

Slowly the time passed.

It was somewhere in the neighborhood of three o'clock when Rex was lying there in a half doze, that he saw Bludsoe hastily enter the camp, coming from the lookout.

His manner indicated that he had made a discovery of some importance. Rex saw him speak to Lord Bruno, who immediately picked up his gun, and accompanied the cowboy. They vanished among the trees in the direction from whence the expedition had come.

That something was in the wind Rex could easily guess. The sleep had now vanished utterly from his eyes. He was never more wide-awake in his life.

Sitting up he awaited the return of the two who had gone forth. The professor lay curled in his blanket sound asleep. Near by reposed the doctor, making the best use of his time. Not a sound came from the depths of the great forest save the cries of wild birds. One of the horses was pawing the ground. Was that a sign of hunger, or did the beast recognize the existence of danger in some shape near by? Really, Rex was not sufficiently educated in the signs of wood and plain to tell.

Almost half an hour had crept by, and still the two had not returned. His ears had been on the alert, but the report of a gun either near at hand or far away had failed to reach him. His curiosity grew apace. Could they have gone to the hill again, so that Bludsoe might impress a mental map of the surroundings upon that wonderfully retentive brain of his? Rex could hardly believe it, since they had left the *laager* headed in just the opposite direction.

This brought to mind the fact that they had themselves come from that quarter. What object could it be that induced the scout to go upon the back trail?

He was still debating this subject without having arrived at any definite conclusion, when his attention was attracted by moving figures, advancing through the forest.

The first sensation he experienced was one of sudden alarm, for his eyes had fallen upon the tall figure of a black warrior, decked in the paint, and cat-tails and gewgaws that go to make up an impi on the warpath.

Then Rex drew a sigh of relief as he discovered another fact—on either side of the brave stalked a form, and in these he instantly recognized Lord Bruno and Bludsoe.

Another glance, and he had discovered that the black, marching with a haughty step between his captors, had his hands bound behind his back, while a rude gag prevented him from making an outcry.

Hastings could guess the truth now, remembering how the scout brought sudden news to milord, and the two had immediately gone out as if to battle.

Undoubtedly the lynx eyes of Red Eric had discovered the black following their trail. All that was necessary for them to do was to select a choice position, and then after the fellow had passed by Bludsoe with a whirl of his trained arm had sent a coil of rope spinning through the air, the noose settling over the shoulders of the impi, when he was instantly hurled to the ground, to be set upon by Lord Bruno ere he could understand what had befallen him, or gather his wits enough to send forth a signal whoop.

What to do with the fellow was a conundrum.

Bludsoe endeavored to communicate with him but the effort was a failure. Either the black did not understand, or else deigned to make no reply. At least he preserved his haughty demeanor.

Had those rough riders been alone, they would speedily have settled the fellow's fate with a ready lasso. That is the code of the South African border, when enemies meet; a code that is as old as chivalry itself, and yields place very reluctantly to modern ideas of mercy.

Lord Bruno could not give his consent, even though

he knew his weakness might come home to him. He was no butcher, to end the life of a man captured in his own country.

Bludsoe shook his head as if not satisfied, but said nothing. When the little party rode out of camp, the black remained, tied hand and foot to a tree, rendered incapable of speech; but his eyes had observed everything, even to the fact that he owed his wretched life to the kindly heart of an English gentleman.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WITCH-DOCTOR.

It was just turning night when they quitted the camp, and took up their line of march. A change had come over the face of nature, since the sun had dropped to rest amid banks of forbidding clouds, and not a star appeared in the heavenly vault.

Jim Bludsoe swept many a glance upward and seemed somewhat concerned; but men of his calibre seldom let the whims and caprices of the weather daunt them when they have any particular business in hand.

Hastings had laid his course from the eyrie to which he and Lord Bruno had mounted with such labor, and Bludsoe, having also taken an observation knew the lay of the land, as only such a genius could grasp it.

Like spectres they rode on, two by two, the only sounds arising from their progress being the dull plunge of horses' hoofs into the yielding turf, or it might be the swish of a branch striking the form of a rider, to spring back into place after his passage.

No one uttered a word above a whisper, and then only when it was actually necessary. Indeed, the singular surroundings appeared to have an influence upon even the usually voluble little professor, for he contented himself with dodging the occasional gnarled branches that seemed like the tentacles of a gigantic octopus of the mysterious African forest, eagerly outstretched to tear him from his perch in the saddle.

Hastings' thoughts during this sombre ride were legion. They ran the gamut of his recent adventures beginning with the daring invasion of that haunted crater in search of the ancient treasure.

Again he could see the fair white priestess of the impis, as she held the host of black warriors spell-bound in her radiant presence—again the charm of her sweet bird-like music floated upon his hearing, and he experienced a sense of exultation at the thought of how speedily his dream of returning to the mammoth kraal backed by a determined force had been realized through the most remarkable as well as luckiest meeting of his life.

There were times when he found it difficult to believe this strange thing had actually come to pass—when he feared it must be a wild phantasy, such as might come to the East Indian “hasheesh” eater, or the disciple of that subtle drug, opium; but only a glance around at the determined comrades touching his elbows was needed to dissipate that delusion.

One thing he could not forget so easily, and this was the black whom they had left in the camp, fastened to a tree and apparently helpless either to escape or draw the attention of his fellows.

Hastings was equally opposed with Lord Bruno to putting the wretch to death, and yet something told him they would have cause to regret their merciful treatment of the brave—that Bludsoe was right in advocating the sternest of measures when dealing with such merciless creatures as these African blacks.

At no time was it actually dark, for the moon hung back of the cloudy curtains that screened the heavens, though under the trees great care had to be taken to

watch their course on account of the dangers which lurk in a South African forest after night has closed in.

Hastings found himself at a loss to determine whether they were making progress in the right direction or at random, and yet he did not consider himself a novice in woodcraft—indeed, his recent feat in penetrating the unknown heart of Africa, and reaching his destination after traveling hundreds of miles through a wilderness where savage beasts, and tribes of even more merciless blacks abounded, was quite enough to stamp him as anything but a greenhorn.

He had confidence in the silent man who so much resembled Colonel Cody—whose whole life had been spent in reading the secrets of Nature until every rustling leaf, every blade of grass, even the whispering wind itself revealed truths as plainly to him as the pages of a printed book might to a scholar.

Several times the little column came to an abrupt halt. No verbal order was given, but the leader had thrown up his right arm as he drew his horse in, and this signal was passed like magic down the line.

Then horses and riders would remain as motionless as though cut in bronze, while eager ears were strained to catch the sounds that had been the cause for the halt.

Once it was some animal that Bludsoe had sighted on the left flank, and which alarmed by their presence stood still for a minute and then plunged heavily through the thicket lying in that direction.

Again it was the report of a gun, distinctly heard booming on the night air, a sound that under ordinary conditions might not have even aroused curiosity, but

which now caused the most prolific speculation as to the nature of the marksman, and what he could be firing at in the nighttime.

The third time they halted for even a more significant reason. Along with the swelling night wind, which was in their faces, came the faint but unmistakable notes of that weird war drum of the savages, the tom-tom, and from the clearness of the sound Hastings mentally figured that it could not be more than a couple of miles distant at the most.

Bludsoe, though comparatively new in South African wilds, had managed to make himself familiar with numerous matters connected with the habits of the natives, and could tell what many of their signal cries meant.

He listened to the peculiar rhythm of the tom-tom's hollow notes, and drawing his horse alongside the steed of his employer, informed the artist they were within a mile and a half of the great *kraal* which Hastings had so minutely described, and that the beating of the drum was the signal for a grand powwow or council, known as an *indaba*, which was never called unless the warriors meant to go to war, or some grave peril threatened the village.

That they could not longer use their mounts was evident to every member of the party. The danger of discovery would be too great in the first place, and if this were not sufficient inducement to cause a desertion, the nature of the ground made it imperative.

Gradually the country had grown more broken as they entered among the hills, for it is in such sections the natives with an eye to security from hostile demonstrations locate their collection of conical huts. When

their course chanced to lead them under the shelter of a forest, the tangled undergrowth proved a decided barrier which only Bludsoe's wonderful ingenuity had thus far enabled them to baffle.

So it was decided to call a halt and leave the horses under the charge of the doctor, who groaned in disgust when he heard the verdict, but proved himself too good a soldier to raise any remonstrance.

Bludsoe called upon them one and all to note the peculiarities of the spot as well as the conditions would allow, for should they have a howling pack of black warriors at their heels on their return, it would be a matter of tremendous consequence for them to be able to make a beeline for their mounts, upon the backs of which they might bid their enemies defiance.

Hastings was in hopes Monsieur Jules might volunteer to keep the doctor company in his lonely vigil, and even cast out a gentle hint in that direction; but the little naturalist had set his mind upon accompanying the expedition, with a Frenchman's superb disdain for the peril involved, and could not be induced to remain behind.

The horses were looked after in order that while ready for immediate service, they might not betray their presence to any lurking enemy by an incautious neigh or whinny. Trust veteran cowboys for understanding all the tricks of their trade.

So the doctor was left behind in charge of the horses and rifles while the six shadowy figures crept out of the tangle and glided in the direction whence came the muffled notes of the war drum.

Jim Bludsoe led them with unerring instinct, occasionally deviating from a direct route in order to avoid

some obstacle, for as Hastings knew from his former experience, the region was a volcanic one, and there were fissures that yawned here and there, as well as cliffs barring their progress.

Louder rolled the incessant alarum of the tom-tom, coming from beyond the ridge, and once this was surmounted the little party had a view such as would certainly have thrilled the oldest veteran in the Matabele wars.

The kraal was lighted by several fires, great care being taken to keep these away from the inflammable huts, which, being for the most part constructed out of rushes and grass, offered wonderful inducements for a blaze.

One conflagration in particular immediately attracted the attention of our adventurers, on account of its size and the fact that a host of moving figures seemed to be gathered in its immediate vicinity.

"The powwow!" said Bludsoe, grimly, watching the animated scene.

They were not satisfied with such a distant view. Hastings kept at the side of the cowboy leader, for, as he had been here before, and his memory retained all the salient points concerning the peculiar topography of the country around the volcano Krokato, he could be of great value as a mentor.

Thus they climbed the face of the hill, making sure that at no time could their presence be discovered by the gathering impis, and by degrees drawing nearer the shelf of rock upon which Hastings and M. Jules had crouched when the fair priestess of the Zambodi appeared so suddenly to their wondering eyes.

Lord Bruno was evidently laboring under the most

intense excitement, but he said little or nothing, yet his grip upon the deadly Winchester he carried was pregnant with great possibilities.

When finally the shelter of the rocks had been gained, they began to creep around toward the shelf from which a fine view of the great fire and the gathering warriors could be obtained.

To stand up would be to run a grave chance of discovery from those below, but by creeping on their hands and knees they were able to make the perilous passage in safety. It was a narrow ledge, in places only a couple of feet wide.

To tumble over the edge would bring about double danger, for not only might a man run the chances of having his wretched brains dashed out on the sharp-pointed rocks below, but his appearance was apt to invite a general onslaught from scores of dark skinned warriors, eager to avenge an insult to their god, for such they would surely reckon the act of spying upon their *indaba*.

Even Monsieur Jules made the journey in safety—indeed, he seemed to have less trouble than Lord Bruno, who being heavier in build proved less agile than the Gaul.

At last the six had reached the point for which they aimed, and thus far nothing had occurred to give the enemy an inkling of their presence, which could be set down as a very fortunate thing indeed.

By this time the racket below had grown to such fearful proportions that it aroused the most intense curiosity, which they gratified by crawling to the front, though Jim Bludsoe whispered a hoarse warning against any one showing more than the tip of his nose beyond

the line of rock, for these blacks were keen of sight, like all people born and bred in the wilderness.

The spectacle that greeted their gaze was one never to be forgotten, and even the most gifted of pens would fail to do the subject justice, with the flashing firelight, the adjacent huts so strangely formed, the circles of black women and old men, and those who took part in the council.

Hundreds of black and powerful looking warriors came pouring down past the kraal gates, dancing in the most grotesque manner as they advanced toward the council fire in crescent wedges, and making the most unearthly and awe inspiring noises.

Over their shoulders each warrior wore a peculiar fabric of jet black ostrich feathers in a sort of hood that flaunted and waved as if imbued with mysterious life every time the wearer made a sudden movement.

Around their foreheads were circlets of tawny fur, taken perhaps from the lion's skin, with long, steel-colored crane's feathers floating above.

About their loins were hung a variegated collection of monkey and cat skins, which dangled in long strips, the tails almost sweeping the ground. The most striking feature of their attire, however, were white and wavy tufts of ox-tail hair, which banded their arms and legs after the fashion in vogue among the Zulus. These, with a wonderful shield of rhinoceros hide and assegais, completed the terrific *ensemble*.

As they poured into the circle some of them purred like cats or growled like wild beasts while others chanted in low, rolling monotonous, and all of them kept up an incessant rattling on their parchment-like shields, the tom-toms adding to the general din. Taken

collectively the racket was terrible enough to almost freeze the blood in the veins of a white pilgrim.

When all had gathered in a great semicircle, with the fire in the midst, still keeping up a monotonous chant that would ring forever and a day in the ears of those who eagerly looked on, a tall buck suddenly sprang into the open where all eyes could behold his sinuous twists and curves, and began a pantomime to illustrate what a terror to the foe he would be in the day of battle.

He leaped high into the air with a venomous thrust of his assegai that would have driven the terrible weapon through an ox. Next he would crouch as though creeping upon an enemy, to suddenly bound erect, strike with his weapon, and finish with a whirl that would have done credit to a dervish.

A second joined him in the ring, to be followed by a third, and presently there were a dozen leaping and jabbering and spitting imaginary foes upon their keen-pointed assegais.

Those who observed this remarkable scene could not withdraw their eyes, such was the horrible fascination that appeared to chain them. Gradually the ring cleared, as the eccentric dancers wearied of their fantastic quick step movement.

But the end was not yet.

A single figure advanced with the oddest side leaps or springs imaginable. Bludsoe whispered in Lord Bruno's ears that this was the witch-doctor or high priest, a crafty schemer whose power over the people was even greater than that exercised by the war chiefs themselves.

By means of these eccentric bounds this high priest,

black and horrid, made the round of the fire, singing the most terrifying chant that ever racked mortal ears.

He was partially covered with gree-grees or charms, consisting of human bones, small gourds containing pebbles of gold, and balls of human hair and bird feathers. Taken in all he looked like a worthy satellite of the Old Nick, running loose on earth in a search for souls, and this was doubtless the very idea he meant to convey, since his prime object in life was to terrify those who believed him in league with the great god M'limo. In his bony hand this demon-like dancer held a small wooden idol which he waved in the air from time to time as though invoking the good will of the oracle.

Hastings could not tear his eyes away from this grisly figure, which seemed an epitome of all that was horrible in the land of the fetish worshipper. Every deed of blood that marks the dark pages in the history of South African colonization may be laid at the door of these wizard priests whose sole business it is to incite by every devilish means in their power, the evil passions of the impis, and send them forth burning with the desire to do murder, to burn and destroy, so that the whites may be utterly wiped from the face of the earth.

Long the war council kept up, until the dancers were exhausted, and the orators hoarse with wild haranguing. Then the great fire was allowed to burn down, after the high priest had cast some witch powder into the flames that turned everything green and ghastly, and had a grewsome effect upon the superstitious blacks, though simple enough to those who watched from above. Gradually the assemblage dispersed. Hastings had

many times looked eagerly in the direction of the ledge where on his previous visit the fair goddess had appeared to ravish his senses, but alas, she came not.

As the fierce warriors trooped back through the wooden gates of the kraal, the hand of his hearty English friend fell on his shoulder.

“Come, ” said Lord Bruno, “now to the great work we have cut out for ourselves.”

BOOK II.

FINDING THE GOLDEN FLEECE.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THEY WENT DOWN INTO KROKATO.

INDEED, the task which these bold argonauts of the South African wilderness had set for themselves, was a stupendous achievement, that might well stagger the most adventurous of men, and none but those of Anglo-Saxon blood would have dared undertake it.

To venture into the enemy's country where the foot of a white man had seldom if ever pressed, and invade the sacred crater of old Krokato in search of a treasure that had lain there for ages—one would be apt to believe this a dream conjured up in the mind of a madman; and yet here was a little company of free lances pledged to carry the wonderful scheme to a successful termination or leave their bones among the kopjes.

Then there was the mission of Lord Bruno, with regard to the mysterious white god whom the impis worshipped—he was grimly determined to have an interview with her ere quitting the enchanted realm, and it could be readily understood that such a project must bring them face to face with new and startling perils.

Having seen the last of the weird war dance of the black braves, and been duly impressed by the grotesque

appearance of the medicine-man, they proceeded to leave the shelf in the same manner they had reached it.

The council fire was burning low, and the monotonous tom-tom of the war drum had finally ceased, for which they were sincerely thankful, as it had tortured their ears while in full blast.

Again they crept along that narrow ledge and lost sight of the kraal with its hundreds of pointed lodges, teeming with black life.

The soul of the artist had been deeply stirred by the picture upon which his eyes had just rested. It appealed to his nature, and had been so impressed upon his mind that he would be able to reproduce it at any moment, with all its hideous accompaniments.

The Englishman had looked upon many remarkable things in his day, for he had spent years in restless wandering in strange lands where scenes bordering on the fantastic and the *bizarre* could be found, to illustrate the pages of his magazine and interest an eager public; but he stood ready to confess that he had never run across a more fascinating theme for brush and pencil than the gathering of the black clans around the witch-doctor's green council fire, together with their fetish dance.

Fortune came near playing them a sorry trick on the way, and it was Red Eric who had the harrowing experience.

Perhaps a stone rolled under him or his hand slipped just when it should have been steadiest. At any rate, while upon the narrowest part of the ledge he was heard to scramble, and Hastings, who was just ahead, upon twisting his head to discover what had gone amiss, was just in time to see the cowboy slip over the

edge. The sight gave him a severe shock, and he strained his ears in the endeavor to hear when the poor devil struck far below, little doubting but that he would have his brains dashed out by the fall.

No such sound reached him, and filled with a curiosity he could not explain, Hastings, having communicated the dire intelligence to the man ahead craned his neck to look over the ledge.

The moon still remained hidden by that dense veil of clouds that had drifted up from the south, but it was far from dark. Even the lodges in the kraal could have been seen by careful scrutiny.

Thus Hastings was quick to discover an object that dangled some seven feet or more down the face of the cliff, and which upon closer scrutiny he was constrained to believe must be the body of a desperate man.

Red Eric had clutched some projecting root or rock, to which he was clinging with a grip like that of death.

To climb the face of that blank wall was an utter impossibility, while if he released his hold, the only result must be a mangled mass of humanity on the rocks below.

Rex felt powerless to lend assistance to the imperiled cowboy, ready though he was to tax his strength or his agility in any effort that might suggest itself.

But there were others.

Jim Bludsoe chanced to be the man ahead of Rex, and he understood the situation instantly. When he had hustled his way back to a point that was just above his comrade, he took a hitch over a spur of rock with his lariat, and dropped the loop with unerring precision upon the man who hung suspended below.

How Red Eric ever got it under his arms was a

puzzle, but he managed it, and while the others laid hold to steady the rope, the reckless fellow came up hand over hand after the manner of a Jack Tar.

Though panting heavily from his exertions he seemed to be rather tickled over his narrow "squeak" as he termed it, than anything else. It took considerable to alarm this dare-devil, who yearned for adventure with all the eagerness shown by a Don Quixote.

When the ledge was left behind Hastings drew a breath of relief, for there had always been a chance that any of them might take the dizzy plunge, and he hardly dared hope that in case it fell to him to lose his footing he would be quite as fortunate as Eric.

Still higher they mounted, climbing over the rough elevations and pushing a passage through brush that opposed them. Hastings kept his wits wide-awake, for to him was entrusted the task of serving as guide to the expedition, and the success or failure attending their movements would depend a good deal on how well he remembered his bearings.

Considering the fact that he had only been in this vicinity once before, and then while the night held sway, he was really doing remarkably well.

So they scrambled and worked their way up the side of the extinct volcano, until the edge of the crater had been gained. Once upon a time, ages ago, a magnificent cone must have towered above this vast cavity, which had been gradually undermined by the fierce fires below, and finally, during some ancient eruption more violent than its predecessors, this crown had been blown off, leaving the awful gulf of boiling lava, which as centuries rolled on, cooled, became covered with soil, and finally possessed a growth of rank vegetation.

The crater was now a valley, surrounded on all sides by walls of dark stone—a valley where in years long, long ago, some people who inhabited the land had built a temple, which in turn mouldered in the grasp of remorseless time, and became a vast ruin, almost hidden from view by bushes and vines.

To descend into this dark abyss was a difficult task, and one that might have brought the cowboys' lassoes into play, only that Hastings' memory failed him not, and he took them unerringly to the path which ran along the face of the rocky wall.

Lord Bruno noted with considerable curiosity that this trail had been cut out from the solid rock, and by mortal hands, but in ages long since past. Thousands of feet had swept up and down this path. What a strange and interesting story it could tell if gifted with the power of speech.

They moved down into what seemed the bowels of the earth—silent as spectres, each man keenly on the alert for danger, and making both hands and feet do service in guarding against such a mishap as fell to Red Eric's share.

All seemed peaceful about them—from the crater came only the sound of some night bird's song, and the whirr of wings close to their ears was occasioned by the fitting of some bat, disturbed in his crevice by their passing.

Once Lord Bruno knew that his leader had paused, but what the cause of it might be Jim Bludsoe said not.

Hastings too had caught what seemed to be a single flash of light in the valley, and was mystified to guess its meaning. Could it be possible some vagrant flame

from the fires far below had found an outlet—such a thing was really beyond the bounds of reason. He was more inclined to lay it to human agency than to believe it a will-o'-the-wisp haunting the ruined temple which perhaps also served as a sepulchre in ages ago.

At any rate, remembering his own experience with the guards who watched the remains of the temple, he was a little worried by the flashing of that light, fearing that it might prove to be a signal which would bring enemies down upon them with the same eagerness that wolves and hyenas display when running their quarry to earth.

All drew a breath of relief when finally they ceased to longer descend. A stream gurgled at their feet, and several stooped to drink. Hastings looked keenly around in order to get his bearings, while Lord Bruno and the cowboy chief kept very close in order that if necessary they might confer.

There seemed to be something uncanny in the singular conditions of the valley—one was bound to be impressed with its remarkable history of the past, and in fancy might expect the spirits of those who had worshipped at this shrine centuries ago to marshal themselves in serried ranks when the desecration of their heathen temple by godless hands was threatened.

Truth to tell, however, these very practical invaders who had come in search of the Golden Fleece, were more worried about the resistance they might meet with from human sources than that proceeding from spirits of the departed.

Hastings had figured upon the matter since his last visit to this mysterious region, and was firmly convinced that there must be some connecting link between the

wizard valley of the temple and that ledge where the white god had shown herself—some passage underground, constructed by artful priests for a purpose of their own, and utilized under the present regime.

As they once more set themselves in motion, every one of the little company felt his nerves tingling with intense eagerness. The spirit of adventure was upon them, and those advocates who worship at this shrine scent the presence of a carnival of riotous action just as readily as the war horse discovers the odor of burnt powder drifting from the battlefield.

It spurred them on as with a goad. They yearned for excitement, and had come a long distance to find it. No danger then, of any weakening among these hardy fellows should the worst happen. Secretly, perhaps, they were in great hopes of a battle with the black hosts before quitting the neighborhood. If this were so, the most zealous among them could find no occasion to complain in the treatment accorded by a benign fortune, for they were certainly destined to see much of action ere old Phœbus again gilded the tips of the cliffs that guarded the crater.

In and out, under the matted foliage, and between black rocks that remained to tell of the infernal fires that had once tossed their red arms above this mouth of Hades, they moved, in a sinuous array, now starting a bird from its roost, and anon hearing the hissing of a serpent as it glided away from their line of march, until at length Hastings slackened his pace and finally came to a halt.

Then they knew they were close to the secret entrance *of the crater temple.*

CHAPTER X.

THE GUARDIAN DEITIES OF THE TEMPLE.

REX had not forgotten.

He had taken his bearings as well as the circumstances permitted, for the tops of the cliffs being outlined against the heavens, certain trees were marked in silhouette which on the occasion of his former visit he had especially noted.

Here he had throttled a fierce black who had hurled himself upon the intruder with a recklessness that could only spring from the abandon of a fanatic, set to guard a sacred shrine.

Having made sure of his position, Rex suddenly dropped on hands and knees and began crawling along the ground. The others, realizing that this was a genuine game of "follow my leader" did not hesitate an instant about doing the same, and considerable dexterity was shown in the endeavor to accomplish the task.

As yet there had been no signs of the guards whom Rex had found in the valley, mutes selected for this especial purpose by the great medicine-man whose word was law throughout the land of the Zambodi.

Nevertheless, it would not do to grow careless. Perhaps the former invasion of the whites had aroused the guardians of the treasure, and they had set a trap so arranged that it would insure the capture or destruction of these daring adventurers, intent upon robbing the ancient temple of its precious relics.

Ah! Rex no longer continued to creep along under

the bushes. He had come to a halt and appeared to be intently examining the ground. That this meant something they readily guessed, and the whisper he started back along the line confirmed the suspicion.

Closing up around him they found that he gazed upon a pile of rocks, some large, others small, the whole appearing like a cairn some five feet in height.

Just such a monument might the old worthies of Abraham's time have made in order to commemorate certain events; and Lord Bruno had more than once in his strange wanderings seen a similar heap of stones mark a grave.

"Here is where the entrance lies. I know it from many things; yes, I could swear to it. But the pile of rocks is new. You can see yourselves no moss has grown over them. They have filled the opening up, taking warning from my other visit. Well, here goes to remove the *debris*."

As he thus whispered Rex set to work, and raising one of the pieces of rock carried it away as silently as he could.

The others waited for no other invitation, but started in at once, working like beavers to accomplish the task. To have dropped upon them without warning must have given one the impression that the gnomes or Brownies were at work, for not a word was spoken, though the pile of rocks diminished in size with incredible rapidity.

Nor was Hastings' prediction at all in the wrong, as they discovered when the last of the stones had been removed, for there was revealed a cavity that yawned before them, above which the builders had raised the cairn after the fashion of an arch.

The entrance to the ruins was displayed.

Bludsoe whispered a caution. He was in the humor to believe these black idol worshippers would be equal to any deviltry in order to trap them.

Rex, however, was filled with eagerness to advance, remembering how near he had been to this rich haul on the former occasion.

So they all entered the tunnel, which was hardly more than a fissure in the rock. Lord Bruno had come prepared, and without delay flashed a little bull's-eye lantern upon the scene. It was well chosen, since, when carried by the leader, the little party would remain in darkness while a great light shone ahead.

More than that, it might yet serve them in the way of necromancy, for the superstitious blacks could easily believe it to be the one glaring eye of a spirit monster, seeking fresh victims.

They advanced cautiously. Rex could not forget how he and the professor had illuminated their way with a torch which, waved above the head had created a tremendous emigration on the part of innumerable bats so that at times the bold explorers were compelled to call a halt in order to prevent their light being extinguished by the current of air created by the myriad of unseen mystical wings.

The passage wound this way and that, now fairly comfortable and anon so narrow that some of them had to squeeze through.

Once they entered a round apartment, and as Rex flashed the light about, the others held their breath with awe.

And no wonder, for it seemed a chamber peopled with the spirits of departed giants. To the left and to

the right could be seen the ugliest old demons ever devised by human hands. Vishnu was not in the same class with them, and Buddha might well hang his head in shame. Had there been a prize offered for the most frightful effigy the skill of man could devise, some of these ancient idols would have been hard indeed to beat.

Lord Bruno made an involuntary move toward his note book, as though his first thought was to secure a counterfeit resemblance of these jolly boys while the golden opportunity presented itself, for really the man who could transfer that collection of ancient beauties to his collection need never lack for a subject in the future.

"Come, none of that!" said Rex, grimly, knowing how overwhelming the artistic spirit controlled one who used the pencil to perpetuate the odd and the beautiful, so that millions might enjoy them.

"But I really must focus the light on that grisly old heathen with two heads. Do give me just five minutes, I beg," said Waterford, as might a man pleading for his life.

"Not a single minute in here. It would be wasted, I tell you. Why these chaps don't even hold a candle to the freaks in the next grotto. Come on—haste to the wedding. Once in there we will fire the pan, and you can scratch away to your heart's content while I crawl into the stomach of the grand-daddy of all the idols and remove the booty."

Thus he artfully lured them on. Even the little Frenchman was shivering, not with fear, but excitement. *Though he had seen these monstrosities before he was not averse to gazing upon them again, for strange*

to say they seemed to exercise a peculiar charm, as hideous objects generally do.

Another passage was traversed. It was no longer a tunnel. The work of man could be seen in the blocks of stone that shaped the walls and even the roof. When one remembered how this temple had for many hundreds of years been a ruin, it was almost like unearthing the relics of Babylon and Nineveh.

Upon these blocks of stone strange pictures had been cut, which no doubt formed stories recording the achievements of this remarkable people in bygone days when old Krokato was hardly cool after the last paroxysm. Many nations thus wrote their history by means of crude pictures, and in both Egypt and America the reading of these stories has given the world much valuable information regarding the past.

Suddenly the passage ceased, and another opening yawned before them. Rex kept the light almost at their feet as they advanced, so the others could see next to nothing, although they were impressed with a consciousness that fearful shapes hung out near them.

"Have you the pan ready with the flash-light powder?" asked Hastings.

The sturdy Briton assured him all was in readiness for a plunge.

"Then touch it off, and remember—silence!"

Instantly there was a "click," and the dreadful darkness was shot into shreds by myriad flashes of dazzling light.

Eager eyes were turned around so as to take in the entire circuit, and in truth, such an amazing spectacle has seldom if ever before greeted human eyes.

No one uttered a sound—indeed, they were almost

paralyzed with the sensation of awe that swept over them, and could only stand and gape and turn their eyes from one colossal figure to another, as though the power of speech had been temporarily placed under a ban by a magician's wand.

As suddenly almost as it had flashed into being, the light died down leaving them in blackness again; but Lord Bruno had prepared for that, and a succession of charges was touched off, which promised to turn night into day so long as they lasted.

As they looked again it seemed to their excited imagination that the idols moved their heads, and a sensation of horror came over the venturesome intruders, who had dared the vengeance of gods in their quest of gain; but a closer examination disclosed the fact that a multitude of hideous bats, no doubt recognizing some affinity in the awful shapes that formed the circle, had attached themselves to ears and noses and chins in countless numbers and hung there, heads down, like brown stalactites.

The sudden flash as of sunlight, in the chamber where gloom had held sway, lo, these many hundreds of years, had startled the creatures of darkness, and there was a constant migration, as in clouds they sought various exits in the way of crevices.

The artist stood transfixed before the chief of all the idols, a monster with three heads and four arms, a fetish that if but glanced at a single time was hideous enough to give one the nightmare for a month.

And Lord Bruno stood there as if entranced, his face beaming, his nostrils dilating with eagerness, his hand creeping in search of his versatile pencil, and his book.

"Well?" asked Rex, smiling.

“I say, isn't he just a beauty now? Did you ever in all your life dream there could be such a monstrosity? Ye gods! I wouldn't miss catching his royal highness triple mug for the Shah of Persia's biggest diamond. Go on with your infernal robbery Rex, my boy, and leave me alone until I've transferred this treasure to paper, and then I'm with you heart and soul. Duty first and play afterward you know, old chap.”

Jove! he was already at it, and the way his pencil dashed over the paper spoke of aroused genius. Indeed, under ordinary conditions it would be something of a job to drag the excited artist out of the ancient temple until he had drawn the more remarkable among that collection of deities, since they excelled any he had ever run across in India or China, in temple, pagoda or mosque.

Rex left him to his idols, Rex who had something on the carpet that was of much more importance to him than all the ugly images the world ever knew, Rex who was quivering with eagerness to know whether he would, as on the previous occasion, be interrupted just when about to possess himself of the treasure of the crater temple.

CHAPTER XI.

PARADISE.

HASTINGS knew what lay before him, and was also aware of the value of time in a case where tremendous perils hung like a pall over their heads.

He advanced full upon the colossus with the three heads. The exceeding brightness of the flash-light powder penetrated every niche and corner of the dusty and musty old chamber, revealing an accumulation of horrible atrocities in the line of idols that might have staggered even a cool customer like Jim Bludsoe; and while the cowboy gave no evidence of alarm, no doubt his flesh experienced that peculiar prickling sensation as if red ants were creeping over the surface of his body.

As for the professor, he was wildly exuberant, and poured forth a jargon of French and English, regardless of the fact that no one paid the slightest attention to his rhapsody, each being concerned in his own affairs.

It seemed to Rex that the triple headed squatting monster glared at him with the eyes of a demon, and the stone arms appeared ready to clasp him in their cold embrace; but Rex had looked upon this monster before and was not at all alarmed.

He passed between the king idol and the one on his left, which resembled a carved Buddha he had seen in *an Indian city*. As he stood there, the three heads *were fully six feet* above his shoulders. The shadows

behind the great image were clean cut and intense, just what might have been expected when a white flash illuminated the centre of the apartment.

Rex knew what to do. He had been posted even on his first visit, thanks to the explicit directions given him in advance. His hand touched the cold stone, slipped along it carefully until a certain projection was reached when the proper pressure caused a portion of the pedestal to give way, revealing an inky black cavity.

The adventurous American was down on his knees instantly, and thrust his head inside the opening.

Strange colored fires seemed to gleam above—lances of green and blood red and golden yellow flashed across each other. Rex knew the origin of these—that they came through the eyes belonging to the three heads of the heathen image, eyes formed of great jewels perhaps, rubies, emeralds and topaz, through which Lord Bruno's photographic flash-light shone with the power of an electric flood.

Another instant and Rex had drawn a match along the cold stone, and as the flame burst forth he applied it to a small candle which he had taken from his pocket, which in turn was fastened to the flag that formed the base of the idol's interior, using a little melted wax to secure it there.

He gave but a single glance of curiosity upward, and smiled at what he saw, comprehending the use to which the stone steps must have been put in the time when this idol was worshipped by the people who had their habitation in the ancient crater of Krokato, ages before the Zulus appeared upon the scene.

Undoubtedly crafty priests were wont to secrete

themselves within the hollow god, and in various ways suited to their unscrupulous ingenuity work upon the credulity of the prostrate worshippers who cast themselves before the stone image.

Rex knew that such impositions were not altogether unknown in the present day, although perhaps they might not be so openly practiced—still, the abject devotees were just as blind with regard to the fearful deception practiced upon them.

After that one cynical survey of the empty space above his head, Rex turned his attention to another quarter, in which he had more reason to be interested.

The dust of ages had settled upon everything—a fine impalpable dust that upon the slightest movement filled the air, almost causing strangulation. When centuries roll on such an accumulation assumes generous proportions even in the most air tight repositories as the pyramids of Egypt—grain by grain it gathers, growing slowly but surely as the years creep on toward eternity.

As Rex Hastings knelt there, with his remnant of a wax candle serving as a torch, his eyes fell upon what appeared to be little more than an irregular heap of stones, lying at the foot of the rude steps, and covered with dust to such an extent that its nature could only be vaguely guessed at.

A second look might arouse still greater curiosity, for it would disclose the fact that something had recently occurred to disturb one end of the dust strewn ridge. Rex could no doubt have explained that to *the queen's taste*, since his hand had been the prime *cause of it all*.

Even now he lost no time in speculation, but reached out a hand that trembled in spite of his remarkable nerve.

Another instant and the desecration had been accomplished—the eyes of a latter day argonaut had fallen upon the treasure of the ancient gods.

The little pile seemed to be covered with a parchment like fabric that had resisted the ravages of time, and at the same time served to protect from the encroaching dust the precious collection which it shadowed.

When this cloth had been cautiously dragged aside, disturbing as little as possible the accretion of ages, Rex gasped for breath, and surely with cause, for certainly the eyes of adventurer never before were ravished with a more wonderful sight since the famous conquistadors of old, Pizarro and Cortez scoured Peru and Mexico, unearthing the treasures of the sun-worshippers and the ancient Aztecs, and gathering rooms full of gold and silver.

Heaped upon each other, in a confused mass, just as they had been tossed into this sacred and secret hiding place ages ago, perhaps by the last priest of the oracle, were scores of golden images and vessels of the most amazing and grotesque shape imaginable, such as would fill the soul of an antiquarian with the most stupendous delight.

Many of these were possibly idols, others may have had some connection with the temple. One must admire the delicate workmanship shown in their construction, and it was very evident that this ancient people who lived in the heart of southern Africa, even *before the blacks held undisputed sway, must have*

brought their knowledge of working in the precious metals either from far away India or from Egypt.

Little Rex cared at that particular moment what the origin of this exquisite gold filigree work upon several of the vases might be—his whole soul was wrapped up in contemplation of the collection, and the thought that by right of discovery it was his almost overpowered him, for at this moment of exaltation scruples were not apt to arise within his mind regarding his prerogative as claimant.

He again stretched out his hand and allowed his eager fingers to close about a vase that stood almost eight inches high. It was bound over the top with parchment, tied with several ligatures, and as he raised the whole Rex found it necessary to exert considerable strength.

To snatch out his knife and score away the parchment was but the work of a second, when out poured a handful of small stones that glittered and glowed even in the feeble candle-light.

They were gems of the purest water, precious stones, rudely cut it is true, but many of them in such a prismatic way as to bring out astonishing beauty—rubies that may once have adorned the brow of a Cleopatra, dazzling diamonds that in the cycles of time passed since they were torn from their original lodgment in the dark mines of the earth, possibly glittered in the crown of some mighty rajah of ancient India, or the coronet of a Chinese Mogul. In mystery was their story wrapped, and in impenetrable gloom must it ever remain.

After lying here in the ruins of the Temple of Azor these centuries, when the world had made such prog

ress, with the Anglo-Saxon race dominating its arteries of trade and seeking adventure and conquest in every land upon which the sun shone, behold, in due time came one of this same venturesome people, fated to tear away the barrier that had so long prevented these princely gems taking their rightful place among the coveted treasures of a world's admiration, and once more casting them forth to become an object of barter among the nations.

Rex was a practical man after all, and he sternly crushed down those feelings of awe and veneration which he must naturally experience upon gazing upon such a remarkable treasure trove.

There would be a better time and opportunity to consider these things in the future, when danger no longer hovered about them.

Just now the practical business in hand enlisted his whole attention and sympathy.

That he had anticipated this very pleasant moment became evident, for what should he do but haul out from a pocket several stout little canvas bags, such as are used by banks all over the world when transporting the gold coin of the realm.

Snatching up a handful of the gems he thrust them into the yawning mouth of a small bag.

As he did so, from the idol above came a rusty sound very like a dismal groan, and which naturally thrilled the adventurer, such was the strain upon his nerves.

Springing to his feet he dashed out of the cavity and sprang around the base of the idol, half expecting to have one of those many arms swoop down and thrust him through with a poisoned blade.

A cheery laugh greeted his appearance and did much,

to restore his equanimity, especially when his eyes also reassured him that all was well.

The man who laughed was of course Lord Bruno, still squatting on the head of a broken idol which Red Eric had rolled out for his benefit, and evidently making remarkable sketches of the assembled deities, which in due process of time would ravish the eyes of those who patronized the enterprising London magazine for which the artist traveled.

"Don't wonder it set your nerves in a tremble, my boy. It's only Jim, perched up on the pedestal, and moving one of the extra arms his royal nibs is provided with. I suppose the priests used to work it from the inside, and that awful groan sent the cold shudders through the multitude lying on their faces. Gad, they were up to delightful tricks in those good old days, eh, and yet in my travels I've seen things just as brazen practiced in communities supposed to be civilized to-day. Go on with your work, Rex. If it's as pleasant as mine you are to be envied I tell you."

Hastings waited not to argue the pro and con of that question, since he was quite in a fever to continue his task. He had traveled many weary leagues, had encountered innumerable perils from wild beasts and still wilder men, in order to enjoy this hour, and now that it had come his whole being thrilled with the sensation of victory such as but few men experience, and then only once in a lifetime.

Again he was on his knees beside that most wonderful pile, which had lain here as if slumbering through the ages—again his eager hand chased the glowing balls of color as they rolled among the baser images, as though playing a game of hide and seek.

In the hunt these golden vessels were tossed aside as though representing little value, which was possibly the truth when a comparison was made with those gems of Ophir, such as the Queen of Sheba might have brought as presents to Solomon when she came with such pomp to test his wonderful wisdom.

At last every fugitive jewel had been successfully cornered and carefully captured. There were two small bags of them, bags that bulged with riches as their like had certainly never done before, for seldom in the history of Mother Earth could so much wealth have been compressed into so small a compass.

Deliberately Rex took some cord and proceeded to tie up the mouth of each diminutive sack, and when this had been completed, he slipped them into the side pockets of his stout coat.

Sometimes it is but a step between absolute, poverty and the wealth of a Cræsus—this is a strange world in which we live, and singular adventures befall the chosen few. At least it falls to the lot of but a select number to pick up a fortune ready made, and slip jewels worth perhaps a cool millicion into his pockets. Perhaps Hastings was born under a lucky star.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROAD TO HADES.

WHEN he had thus made sure of the quart or so of glistening gems that may have once bedecked the form of the ugliest of idols, Rex found that he could condescend to smaller things.

The queer images and vessels fashioned out of pure gold claimed his attention. Their intrinsic value must be quite a snug dot, if one could but convey them to the busy marts of men, where such things were scrambled for with the most feverish eagerness.

Really, he was surprised to see how calmly he could view such a collection of the most precious of metals: but then when one has already dined upon the most exquisite of viands, he is able to look upon an ordinary feast without emotion, though at another time the sight of the same spread might set his mouth to watering.

Picking up a couple of the least cumbersome of the images, he lugged them out of the receptacle and planted them at the feet of the working artist, who halted in his labor long enough to vouchsafe the antiques a scrutinizing glance and then say:

"Found 'em all right, eh—well, they are daisies, now, I'll admit. Get Jim and the rest to assist, old boy. I'm too much engaged, you see—really, wouldn't put a stop to my sketch for all the gold in Africa, Haggard and his King Solomon's mine to the contrary," and he scratched away for dear life.

Bludsoe was quite ready to help, and the others also came quickly to the front, so that in an exceedingly brief space of time the little pile of golden relics had been switched from the interior of the old barbarian god to a spot in the middle of the chamber.

Lord Bruno had finished his sketch of the remarkable three-headed deity and condescended to inspect the collection with the eye of one who might be called a connoisseur.

And forsooth, it was a sight well worthy the attention of prince or peasant, a brave accumulation of quaint vessels that bore such mute though eloquent testimony regarding the cunning and skill of ancient gold-beaters in the days when the Pharaohs reigned over Egypt.

The professor actually went down on his knees before the treasures, as did the reprobate children of Israel before the golden calf. To him the intrinsic part was as tinkling brass when placed in comparison with their amazing historical value.

Even the cowboys were quite taken with the oddity of some among the images, and Red Eric burst into a loud laugh as he snatched up one that appeared to be half way between a gorilla and a man, with a certain suspicious leaning toward the Egyptian style of sculpture as witnessed in the temple of Luxor.

That laugh, how weird it sounded—a dozen tongues seemed to take it up—from one end of the chamber to another it was echoed, and hustled back and forth with the rapidity of a tennis ball in a hard fought championship game.

It was as if the grave assemblage of hideous old gods had been given the breath of life, and were mocking

the merry cow-puncher, whose merriment came to a speedy end.

At the same moment, as though there might be some connection between the mad, rebounding echo, and the spirits that haunted the ruined temple of Azor, the brilliant light which had served them so well all this while, suddenly went out, not even deigning a parting flicker in farewell.

Exclamations arose, for the first thought that flashed over them was that there might be something supernatural about it all—they had heard of a curse being left with a hidden treasure, a poisonous vapor perhaps, fastened in a Pandora box, that would immediately finish any one who dared open it.

All of them were plain, practical men of good common sense, and when the first shock had departed, they found themselves ready to laugh at the thrill which had involuntarily swept over their frames under the impulse of that queer coincidence.

“The powder has given out,” spoke up the Englishman in a voice that showed no trace of a tremor—“be patient a moment, my hearties. I’ve another package handy, and we’ll soon have plenty of light.”

Then a match crackled—puff! the darkness was shattered, and in its stead came that same dazzling light which had before permeated almost every crack and cranny in the great low-ceiled chamber.

Hastings uttered an exclamation.

“What now?” demanded the Briton, recognizing in this cry a note of alarm, and perhaps believing Rex had been shaken by a sudden winnowing of wings overhead, as some gigantic bat beat the air, frightened at the new flood of light.

"Yonder—I could swear I saw a crouching figure, a giant black, suddenly spring out of sight behind that leaning god."

All eyes were instantly glued upon the spot he indicated, but no sign remained of the phantom figure Rex believed he had seen.

"Possibly a delusion," said Lord Bruno, as he bent over the treasure-trove and examined some of the queer conceits that were *fac similes* of the barbaric gods with which they were even then surrounded.

Rex had some good stubborn Scotch blood in his disposition, and having taken hold it was hard for him to let go. He shook his head in a negative way, saying:

"Of course that would be a possibility, but I am far from willing to admit that my eyes deceived me. Here is Bludsoe—perhaps he too saw it vanish like the smoke on a windy day—how is it, Jim?"

The cowboy confessed that he had been looking in another quarter when the light resumed sway, and therefore failed to see what Rex mentioned, as no sign of its presence hovered about the spot when he did fasten his eyes upon the angle.

"Still, it's an easy thing to make a dead certainty of it. Come with me, Mr. Hastings, and unless the thing of evil possessed the wings of a bat we'll be sure to discover some sign of his presence, I swear."

Rex instantly understood what he meant to imply. The dust that lay so promiscuously around would betray the fact whether a human being had entered the chamber in that quarter or not.

Jim Bludsoe, ere trusting himself in such a subterranean trap as the black temple of Azor, had prepared

for an emergency by securing several billets of wood to serve as torches should the occasion warrant.

Possibly they were not equal to the lightwood flambeaux he might have secured had he been given a better opportunity, but they promised to answer the purpose.

One of these he now dipped in the glowing furnace on the pan. It immediately took fire, and while its puny flame held no comparison with the intense glow of the flash-light, still he was satisfied.

Rex followed at his heels, leaving the others busily engaged in stowing the golden images that were worth five times their weight in sovereigns, into a couple of leather saddle bags, fetched for the purpose.

Straight over to the spot designated by the adventurer Jim Bludsoe stalked, holding the blazing torch above his head.

Rex, even while quivering from excitement, could not but remark what a wonderfully fine picture the athletic cowboy made as he moved on, for you see Rex had been somewhat of an artist in days gone by, and once that spirit finds lodgment in a man it never leaves him.

A dozen strides and Bludsoe was at the spot—he swept his torch in advance as he bent low. Almost immediately Rex heard him give an exclamation, and from its exultant ring he knew in advance that his suspicions were confirmed.

That flying glimpse of a disappearing object was not the stretch of imagination.

“What have you found?” he asked, coming alongside the plainsman, and also riveting his gaze upon the ground.

"Footprints, and not made by an angel, either, you bet," returned blunt Jim, pointing to where the dust had been disturbed, and there Rex discerned a giant imprint.

It meant much to them—discovery—an alarm, the assembling of the black hosts, the destruction of their only path out of the deep crater, a siege, and ultimate destruction! No wonder then, with these possibilities staring them in the face both Rex and the cowboy were anxious to know whither the black spy had flown.

Besides, Bludsoe was at once overwhelmed by a feverish desire to follow, that being a part and parcel of his religion.

He flashed the light over the trail, and Rex did not say nay—indeed, he was in quite the mood to accompany Bludsoe down through the infernal regions if so be there was an object in visiting that abode of the dark shades.

As he went on Jim kept up a running commentary upon the situation, and in that way gave vent to his feelings, while at the same time imparting a certain amount of information; for Rex had never had much practice as a trailer, and might be looked upon as something of a "tenderfoot" in cowboy parlance.

"See, here's where he made that flying leap when you had a glimpse of him, and I just reckon as how the critter must have been scared nigh to death when the fire flashed up so sudden like. He landed yonder—you can see how he slipped as he came down, but recovered and ran like a scart deer.

"Here's the wall of the place, but jest in this spot you see it's riven, and through that opening our chap went licketty split.

"Now, if you asked my advice, sir, I'd surely say we'd be foolish not to go a little way into that ere crevice and see if we can't run across this cussed spy, because if he once gets clear, we'll have to pay the piper. Is it a go, Mr. Rex?"

His tone and manner were persuasive, as well as his words, and Rex, falling in with the spirit of adventure, as he recognized the value of keeping this scout from giving the wild alarm, immediately acquiesced.

So they plunged into the black crevice, which looked more like some freak of nature, resulting from a convulsion of the mountain in the days when Krokato was violent, than any possible passage constructed by man's ingenuity.

It was astonishing how rapidly the experienced Bludsoe pushed on. He seemed to keep one eye on the ground so as to follow the trail, while with the other he endeavored to pierce the darkness that lay like a pall just beyond the line marking the limit of their feeble torch's power.

Hastings could not but experience a sensation of thrilling interest as he kept at the other's heels.

They had quickly passed around several angles, so that a backward glance which Rex shot over his shoulder failed to reveal the first sign of light from the rear. On either side were the roughened, black walls, which looked very much as though they had been burned by the fire of ages, while under their feet the base of the crevice was threatening to trip them up with every move.

To add to the interest of the affair, both of them began to sniff suspiciously at the atmosphere, as though aroused unbidden fears, for it became strongly im-

pregnated with sulphur or brimstone, as though they approached the bottomless pit.

And as they thus rushed on Rex was surprised to have the flambeau thrust into his hand, while his companion shouted over his shoulder:

“ We’re closing on him fast, sir ! ”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SNAP OF A ROPE.

It was easy to see that the cowboy had some plan of action in his mind—that even as he ran he had arranged a scheme by means of which he hoped and expected to accomplish the downfall of the black spy who scurried on before, and of whom they had occasional glimpses as he bounded from pillar to post in a sullen, unwilling way, as though he liked not the idea of being thus chased so heartily into the bowels of the earth.

Rex entered into the spirit of the game with a zest known only to the hunter—an eagerness that is seldom reciprocated by the fugitive, be it man or beast, straining every nerve and muscle to escape.

He kept close at Bludsoe's heels, and waved the torch above his head so that with the draught caused by this double movement, the flame hissed and roared, and ate deeper into the wood of which the flambeau was composed.

The air grew even more suggestive of the infernal regions—it was fetid and strongly impregnated with that sulphurous odor which they had noticed ever since plunging into the crack in the black rocks.

Still Jim Bludsoe ran on, and Rex would not allow any man to outdo him in an affair of this kind, no matter where it led. That was the Scotch blood of his way-back ancestors again—he owed much that was *wholesome* in his disposition to those sturdy men of *brake and fen* from whom he was descended.

As his eye rested momentarily on his companion he discovered that Jim had made his lasso ready—that weapon which is more than knife or revolver in the hands of one to the manner born, and with which an adept can perform feats that might stamp him a wizard in the eyes of a tenderfoot.

He coiled it as he ran, and woe betide the black fugitive once the rope was launched forth by that practiced arm.

All the while they gained, possibly because the man who fled before them experienced an unwillingness to explore the mysteries of the subterranean passage, and also on account of their avoiding obstacles he stumbled over, thanks to the light.

Now he could be seen very plainly—Rex even caught the look of deadly fear upon his dark face as he twisted his head around in the endeavor to discover whether they were still gaining.

He really felt sorry for the wretch, and yet, knowing what it meant for them should the Zambodi warrior escape to sound the alarm, and arouse the black impis within ten leagues of the sacred crater, he was just as determined as Jim to continue the mad race until it came to its legitimate conclusion.

Twice he shouted to the fellow to stop and surrender, but his voice sounded like a trumpet blast in that narrow, ragged cleft, and appeared to only inspire additional terror in the fugitive, judging from the fresh spurt he took, fear lending him wings.

Bludsoe was almost ready to hurl his rope—he had begun to swing it around his head as if to give warning to Rex that he might keep his distance.

The black runner no longer scrambled over the rocks

like a frightened chamois—he had come to a full stop and his attitude was that of a man who finds himself between the devil and the deep sea—behind him were those white, adventurous spirits from whose touch he had fled in such haste like one possessed, while before him yawned an abyss whence arose a weird vapor that looked like phantom smoke, together with a dull glare as of some fiery furnace far down in the bosom of the earth.

Rex saw and his heart was chilled with horror at the terrible choice thrust upon the fugitive.

To make the leap meant but one chance in ten of his reaching the opposite side, such was the width of the awful chasm from which these sulphurous fumes drifted, and should failure be his portion his flight to the gates of Hades must be rapid indeed.

As the black athlete stood there, with every muscle strained in anticipation of the fearful task before him, and with one foot drawn back to give impetus to his leap, he presented a picture young Hastings could never forget to his dying day—a picture that has since graced the walls of a *salon* and aroused the most intense admiration for the marvelous look of fear and resolution combined upon the black face of the sinewy *Zambodi* warrior.

Bludsoe was swinging his lariat with increasing power, as though it were his intention to wrap the reckless spy in its coils ere he had a chance to launch himself forth upon such a haphazard mission.

He was too late to prevent it.

The black athlete suddenly leaped through space, his *form* describing a parabola as it rose and fell again.

Bravo! he struck the other side, clearing a greater

space than the highest record of a standing jump ever reached, for the dread of death gave the amazing power of steel springs to his muscles.

“Great Scott! what a magnificent leap, and he made it—he has landed on the other side—a tiger could have done no better. Not yet—not yet—he staggers wildly on the brink—his footing is insecure and he failed to throw his weight forward. Poor devil—he is lost after all—my God! what a fate for a brave man.”

Even while Rex was thus speaking the black warrior had been going through the most tremendous contortions in an endeavor to maintain the slight advantage secured by planting his feet upon the rocky brink of the cleft; but instead of gaining ground his most frantic and exhausting muscular efforts only served to keep his balance for a space not exceeding fifteen seconds of time.

Then from his lips burst a shriek such as might proceed from the lost souls in torment. Despair had swallowed up hope, and a consciousness of his terrible doom overwhelmed him.

So he ceased his mad efforts, and toppled over into the abyss, to go plunging down into the awful depths where mortal man could never descend and live.

But Jim Bludsoe was there, the man who had handled a lariat since a lad, Jim Bludsoe, who while the wretched brave wildly endeavored to maintain an equilibrium had rushed dangerously near the other edge, and giving his coiled rope a parting whirl, flung it out across the gulf.

As the man threw up his arms and fell back, Rex saw the noose had settled over his head and shoulders.

There was no time to see more, so rapidly did the

unlucky devil shoot downward; and yet through the mind of Hastings flashed a sudden intense fear for his companion's safety, for if Jim Bludsoe held the other end of the lariat, the quick shock, as the entangled human plummet reached a perpendicular would be more than apt to drag him over the edge.

The cowboy however, was one not to be caught napping in a case like this. He realized the danger even while casting his lariat, and the very instant its noose settled over the shoulders of the staggering black, by a quick turn he made a couple of coils around a projecting spur of rock that fortune seemed to have placed there for just such a purpose.

Then came a thud as of a strained bass string on a violincello, instantly followed by a sharp, whip-like crack. Heavens! the lariat had not been equal to the strain—a sharp edge of rock, almost as keen as a knife blade as they afterward discovered, had severed the tense strands—and the wretched athlete had gone down to eternity!

Rex crawled to the edge and looked over. What he saw made him shudder. Far, far below he could distinguish what looked like a small creek of red and yellow fire, though the clouds of smoke and vapor at times became so dense as to utterly hide it from mortal vision.

Yet he knew he was gazing upon those slumbering internal fires that ages upon ages ago had boiled and bubbled in the tremendous crater, tearing the crown of the mountain away in their mad upheaval.

And that river of fire had formed the sepulchre of the *wretched black spy* who would have sounded the alarm *if given the chance*, and brought his tribe shouting wild

war-cries about the devoted little band of adventurers. Perhaps it was just as well—in the fight for a continent, what matters one poor life, white or black—the beautiful land must be wrested from the grasp of fetish worshippers, and these seekers for treasure are really the pioneers of civilization. Possibly it is a strange philosophy, and yet the deeper it is examined the more pregnant with truths it becomes. Heroic treatment is sometimes necessary when glorious results are to be attained.

Jim Bludsoe looked grimly disappointed and it is to be feared was using some pretty strong language under his breath.

It was not on account of the poor devil of a black he lamented, but the fact that the major portion of his trusty lariat had accompanied the fellow when he made that headlong plunge into the fiery Styx far below. For a cowboy to be in the wilds without even an apology for a lasso, is something little short of a dire calamity.

At first he vented his abuse upon the rope, and loaded it with all manner of opprobrious epithets for proving so treacherous, until he snatched the torch from the hand of his companion and examined the rock around which he had snapped a couple of coils with such instantaneous rapidity, when of course he speedily discovered the true inwardness connected with the parting of the strands.

Then he called himself a fool for making an effort to save a wretched "nigger" when his death meant life to them; and Rex found it exceedingly difficult to comfort him as they began to retrace their steps.

It was time they were getting further away from that

terrible crack in the rocks, for so powerful was the sulphuric gas that crept out of the abyss that it choked them, and they were almost overcome.

Upon reaching the main chamber of the temple, they found their companions awaiting their coming with no little anxiety.

They had plunged the treasure into the yawning mouths of the saddle bags, and disposed of the surplus about their persons, so that each and every one had a singularly corpulent appearance. As Rex and his companion emerged from the passage, they found Lord Bruno igniting one of Jim's torches, as the flash-light powder had given warning that it was about to yield up the ghost, while the professor had crawled inside the hideous three-headed image and was working its four arms, in the endeavor to discover how the fearful groaning sound was produced.

Little Phil hovered near Lord Bruno, as usual, while Red Eric had climbed upon one of the idols and was busily engaged in a laudable endeavor to punch the eyes of the image out, under the impression that they were composed of jewels.

The return of the warriors was greeted in a noisy fashion, for Lord Bruno gave a hearty English cheer, Red Eric waved his hat and let out a genuine whoop such as was his habit when in mad chase of runaway cattle, and even the French savant worked the arms of the head god from his perch within, with the result that a succession of diabolical sounds floated upon the air such as might have frozen the blood in a Christian's veins, and must have been very demoralizing to the ignorant and superstitious fetish worshippers in the *long ago*.

Lord Bruno had seen enough. Now that Rex declared his mission to the temple satisfied they must quit these strange realms where the relics of a departed race held sway. Besides, Lord Bruno was filled with a most intense anxiety regarding the prospects of an interview with the mysterious white god of the Zambodi.

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE THROWER OF ASSEGAIS.

FAMILIARITY breeds contempt without a doubt, for while all of them must have been more or less awed upon first entering the double chamber, and looking upon that silent assemblage of ancient and hideous deities, now that they had grown accustomed to the grinning or solemn-visaged chaps, it was small reverence they gave them.

Lord Bruno sounded the retreat, and two by two they stalked into the passage leading to the open air.

The sudden presence of the black spy had warned them that the old temple was not unguarded—while the Zambodi might not be in sympathy with the religion practiced by those who had occupied this region centuries before their coming, still it was holy ground for them, and the invasion of white men must be severely punished.

Only by death could the adventurers atone for their audacity in polluting the cemetery of idols with their hated presence.

Under the circumstances they kept a bright lookout as they advanced along the well remembered passage, heading for the exit. They could reach that spot none too speedily to please them, for the pure air of heaven would be like balm of Gilead to their distressed lungs and eyes, racked by the sulphur fumes of the cracked earth.

At last, Jim Bludsoe in the lead they reached the

opening, and one by one crawled out of the depression. The first thing they did was to fill their lungs with air and expel it, only to pump them full again. It was more delicious than nectar of the gods, and Red Eric roundly swore he could never quaff enough of the invigorating ozone.

Bludsoe was already looking to the right and to the left in his usual cautious manner. Possibly some intuition of portending trouble weighed upon his spirits.

Before his eyes had completed the circumference of the cliffs formed by the walls of the crater, Jim was heard to grunt in the peculiar way he had when something of an extraordinary nature was forced upon his observation.

His lordship knew what this meant, for he had made a special study of the cowboy's peculiarities.

"Where aways?" he asked, instantly, and then followed the line marked by the extended arm and finger of the other.

"Yonder where the dip lies, and the swell ain't quite as high as the rest. Keep your eye on it, sir—there, you saw it I reckon."

"I saw something flash, but it was quickly gone—just as a giant firefly might make a couple of plunges and vanish, or the lantern of a coast lighthouse gleam for an instant over the stormy waves, only to be followed by darkness."

"Just so, sir, this was a signal too, handed on from one black sentry to another on a second elevation, and telegraphed straight into the *kraal* at the foot of the kopje. What they are saying I don't just know; but I can make a big bluff of a guess, and I reckon it's *about us*," was the other's cool response.

The breath of danger was as incense to the nostrils of the rover, who scented the battle afar off.

Rex was hardly so composed, for somehow, the possession of those two little bags in his pockets gave him a feeling he could not have explained, but which was akin to a desire that he might reach the outposts of civilization as speedily as possible. He recognized the change that had come over the spirit of his dream, and even laughed quietly in scorn of his sudden discretion.

But Lord Bruno was disappointed. He had arranged his plans, and it was exceedingly hard for him to give up. The motive that urged him on was one that had been born in the heart. He had fostered it for many days and dreamed of it at night, until the idea of finding in this mystic goddess of the Zambodi the one who had so long been lost to kindred and friends had become the ruling passion of his life.

What to him were the eager longings of Rex Hastings, in his search for the Golden Fleece, or the equally mad desire of the French savant intent on discovering that strange freak long spoken of as the "missing link," and which was to send his name down the ages in harmony with such honored ones as Darwin and Spencer? The motives of the Englishman were of a much nobler character than these human desires for riches and fame.

That was why he contemplated the possible rising of the impis with a clouded brow. It was not any craven fear of personal danger, for Waterford had been in the army during his younger days, and demonstrated that he was a man who knew not the meaning of the word—upon the hot sands of Egypt with the column that *struggled up the Nile to the gates of beleaguered Khartoum, only to arrive after brave Chinese Gordon*

had met his fate and the stronghold been sacked by the fanatical followers of the Mahdi, he had led his men in many a fierce scrimmage with fierce Arab and desert warrior, winning fresh laurels for his family name.

Lord Bruno was not the man to let his feelings get the better of his judgment. He knew just as soon as he heard Bludsoe's warning, that their business was to get out of the sacred crater as speedily as possible.

So far as they knew, there was but the one means of gaining the outer world. That was *via* the narrow, oblique shelf along which they had so cautiously picked their way when descending from the ragged black cliffs.

Should they meet the blacks when half way out, there would be the deuce to pay, with the chances pretty much in favor of their leaving a legacy of bones in Krokato, over which future explorers would spin gauzy tales of speculative fancy.

"To the outlet!" was his slogan, and among them there was not a man but who comprehended what this signified.

It was not a mad rush by any means—the weight of the gold laden bags would have prevented this even had there been any inclination to disorganization on the part of the little company; but each one seemed to recognize the value of time, and a bee-line was struck for the spot where they had landed.

The moon was still hidden by dense masses of clouds, and Bludsoe cast an occasional glance overhead as though he had some idea they would yet have to stand up under a flood when the gates of heaven were opened. Such a circumstance is a small affair in the eyes of a cowboy who flirts with nature's smiles and frowns

every day of his life, learning to accept her unpleasant moods with as much equanimity as he does her favors.

Nothing occurred to disturb them while they pressed through copse and over blasted rocks, so that the wall was speedily gained.

Jim's judgment was as true as steel, for he had guided them to the identical place they wished to reach. So much for his faculty of observation, which long practice had made almost perfect.

Jim led off, with Lord Bruno at his heels, the others stringing out, and Red Eric bringing up the rear.

It is easier to climb up a wall of this character than to descend: besides, having once gone over the ground they were in a measure familiar with it.

Bludsoe held himself prepared for an emergency, and acting upon his suggestion every one of the others kept an eye on the man just ahead, ready to bring their progress to a sudden halt, should the signal be given.

Up they climbed.

The narrow ledge was sufficient to give a foothold, but in places they were compelled to be very cautious lest a slip might prove fatal.

Half the distance had been covered and as yet no note of warning passed along the line. It was good. Their spirits arose, and hope once more came to the fore.

Then came the shock.

Bludsoe had started to creep around an angle, when his eagle eye detected a sudden movement beyond. True to his instincts the plainsman instantly flattened himself out on the narrow ledge, and none too soon, for *something went* hissing through space just where his *body had been*, to bury itself in the depths below—

something that cut the air with a sound never to be mistaken—something that carried death in its whistle.

It was a Zambodi assegai or spear.

Ordinarily Jim would have been prompt to snatch a revolver from his belt, and return the courtesy with a few leaden cards that must have voiced his feelings; but under the peculiar conditions he was averse to making such a response just now, since it would positively throw off the mask, and give notice of their presence.

Hence, his first act was to shuffle back around the angle, much as a crab might retreat in the face of danger. Luckily there was room enough between Lord Bruno and himself to allow this movement.

The line no longer kept in motion, but its constituent members came to a stop, and huddled as close together as the narrow limits of their footing would admit.

All had heard the angry hiss accompanying the passage of the assegai that had shot through blank space, and no explanation was needed. They simply waited to hear what Bludsoe had in his mind—to carry out any suggestions he might offer.

After all, it was Hobson's choice, since to retreat meant in all probability annihilation in the crater, and they could not stay where they were.

The two leaders had their heads together and were busily engaged in deciding what should be their line of action. Since the alarm had already been quietly given, what difference would it make should they take prompt and decisive action? The path must be cleared at all hazards, come what might. Once out of the great hole it would devolve upon them to meet the assault of

the black legions, and where force would not avail let Anglo-Saxon wit take its place.

So the decision was speedily made—they must force the passage at all hazards.

Bludsoe again advanced, but this time he was more cautious, knowing that a vindictive foeman crouched around the sharp angle, no doubt with a second assegai raised and ready to be hurled with all the force of a mighty arm.

Rex peering over the hunched shoulders of Lord Bruno could see that the cowboy had halted just at the point where the rock turned. He appeared busily engaged with something, and Rex found his curiosity aroused when he saw the wind frolicing with the long locks of Jim Bludsoe.

Ah! now he made another move, pushing something out in front, so as to make its presence known around the angle, something which at first was a mystery to Rex, but he suddenly awoke to the fact that it was the cowboy's head gear, fastened to the end of a torch.

It was a venerable trick, a regular old chestnut along the frontier where Bludsoe had learned the ropes of his trade, and one he might have really been ashamed to have been caught practicing; but there was always an even chance that it had not become so familiar to the South African impis.

Again was heard that peculiar rushing sound, so associated with the swift flight of an assegai from a practiced hand—the sombrero was violently shaken, for the keen pointed dart had passed entirely through it with the utmost ease.

Bludsoe laughed outright at the eagerness with which his black foeman above had bitten at the bait; but even

while thus giving vent to his appreciation of the good fortune that had befallen him, the cowboy was quick to set himself in motion.

Rex saw him creep part way around the angle—saw him throw an arm forward, and with the action came the detonation of a seven shooter, that echoed back and forward, from one wall of the crater to another, growing more feeble with each rebuff.

It did not die away, but was drowned in a human shriek of agony. Jim had fired with some result; and presently they heard the lifeless body of the black guard go tumbling from rock to rock as it sought a resting place in the dark vale below.

Before that happened Jim Bludsoe was pushing on, ready to meet other foes if so fate determined, ready to undertake almost any peril, however great, if there was a chance of success beyond.

Yet they had thus advanced only a dozen yards when once again the leader came to a halt, and this time instead of silence, they heard his voice as he bellowed out:

“Back—back, on your lives! They have undermined the trail—the whole face of the rock is trembling in the balance!”

Like sheep cowering at sight of the wolf they beat a hasty retreat—a gap opened between Lord Bruno and his cowboy guide, and the face of the gneiss cliff was shaved as with a giant razor, the trail being carried away in the general ruin.

CHAPTER XV.

WITH THE CLIFF CLIMBERS.

JIM BLUDSOE did not go down with the avalanche of gneiss that, detached from the face of the mighty cliff where it had held forth for ages, went crashing into the awful depth below, with a roar not unlike that of thunder.

His extreme agility stood him in good service as it had done on many another occasion.

Besides, he had detected the quivering of the rock just in the nick of time, and by crowding back almost upon Lord Bruno, managed to avoid the tragic end with which fate threatened him.

The little party crouched there for a full minute as if turned into stone, and it would not be strange if their blood became cold under the possibility that in another brief space of time the narrow shelf upon which they knelt would become detached in the same mysterious manner as had the rock ahead of them, when one and all must be hurled into eternity.

The stupendous uproar as the mass burst into fragments below, seemed to arouse the slumbering echoes of Hades, and for the time being it was utterly impossible to hear a human voice even when raised to a shout, for the unseen giants of the cliffs were hurling the detonations back and forth as though engaged in a game of *shuttlecock*.

Gradually, however, as though the gnomes of the air

wearied of carrying their messages to and fro, this clamor grew less in volume; and those who continued to cling to the remains of the cliff trail, were able to reassure themselves with regard to the stability of their support.

At least it was a satisfaction to know that immediate death was not to be their portion, though the future looked anything but inviting.

Lord Bruno was the first to speak.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish, now. Bless my soul, not even a chamois would venture to go ahead, since the trail is entirely gone. Come, Jim, what's to be done in this emergency?" he ejaculated, trying to be as cheery as the gravity of the situation would admit.

Bludsoe craned his neck and looked at the awful gap which extended to the next angle of the wall, some thirty feet away. It was as smooth as the side of a house, not a single trace of the rocky shelf remaining. And this abyss began just two feet beyond the spot where he knelt.

"To go on is impossible, to remain here any length of time suicide. That's but one other thing left—we must go back to the crater!" was the cowboy's quick reply.

They were men of resolution, and with a practical knowledge concerning the value of time in a case where life was at stake. Immediately Red Eric faced the other way, and began retracing his steps. Not a murmur arose—they expected hard knocks and even took a certain pleasure in pitting their powers of endurance against the flings of outrageous fortune.

All sounds had died away, the last faint echo having ceased to cross the great gulf. A fine dust had fol-

lowed the crash of the tons upon tons of rock into the valley, but this gradually settled.

Perhaps some of them half expected that a second avalanche might follow the first, possibly leaving them stranded high up on the face of the cliff, with retreat cut off in both directions.

Fortunately this did not occur, and in due course of time the little company reached the bottom in safety.

The future looked anything but cheerful, and yet one and all felt thankful that the precious legacy of life yet remained; for they shared the Briton's policy that there was hope so long as they were free to think and act and fight.

To sit down and supinely wait for a turn in the tide so heavily setting against them was not according to their nature. Such men are of the same mould as Napoleon in making their influence felt in fashioning circumstances.

A council of war was immediately held, at which several startling propositions were made, looking toward their escape from the crater of Krokato.

To bring about such a happy result it was of course necessary that they scale the frowning cliffs, for in no other way were they likely to meet with success, although Rex did mention his suspicion that the ancient temple might be connected with the outer world by some subterranean passage, if they could only be fortunate enough to discover where this lay.

More practical means must be employed to gain their end. A cowboy's first reliance in time of trouble is naturally his lasso, and the decision arrived at after *mature* discussion was that if they could find the *proper place*, through their natural boldness and agility,

together with a judicious use of the ropes, they might manage to overcome the odds against them and scale the heights.

The next thing on the programme was to make an examination of the walls, and in order that this task might be carried out with as little delay as possible, they divided into two companies, moving off in opposite directions.

Of course such a job took time, for the light was wretched and obstacles numerous. Rex and Lord Bruno, accompanied by Red Eric formed one of the parties. As the cliffs were outlined in silhouette against the clouded sky, they were able to distinguish, to a certain extent at least, what the nature of their face might be.

The passage of the semicircle was made without disaster of any sort, though several times glimpses were had of fire signals on the heights, which warned them that the black clans must be gathering with the idea of crushing the daring invaders.

Thus they met the other party, and hasty views were exchanged, after which it was determined just where an assault upon the cliffs promised the best chances of success.

Fortune favored them in one way at least.

The clouds had grown heavy, and no longer did the light of the moon passing through the veil that had been drawn across her face serve to illumine the crater.

Instead, a gloom gradually settled upon the scene of such remarkable events connected with the dim past.

Just as the little company of adventurers, having decided upon their plan of campaign, started to the

spot selected for the commencement of their operations, a sudden flash of lightning illuminated the scene, to be followed by the dull rumble of thunder.

Evidently nature was about to supply the light and orchestra, the theatre was to be the vast crater of Krokato, and the actors upon the stage our little company of choice spirits pitted against the black hordes of the Zambodi, led by their witch-doctor, who would be sure to inflame all their passions upon the altar of fanatical enthusiasm, for that white men should invade the sacred soil of the crater was sufficient cause to arouse these ignorant barbarians to fever heat.

Having gained the scene destined to witness their gallant effort to escape from the fate that seemed to overshadow them, a hasty examination was made.

Of course Bludsoe was the leading spirit in the enterprise, but there were others who came very close to him in a desire to reach out and grasp each difficulty that projected itself in their way, so that it might be throttled ere serious mischief could result.

The face of the cliff at this point was more ragged than in any other quarter, and Jim had declared he believed it within his power to climb it.

With the sturdy intention of proving his words true, he wrapped Little Phil's lariat around his body in such a way that it would not interfere with his muscular action.

Then he boldly assailed the problem.

No man was better fitted for such a hazardous task, since Bludsoe united the strength of a buffalo with the agility of a cat, and was moreover quick-witted, so that *he could grasp every opportunity blown within reach by the favoring winds of chance.*

He speedily vanished from the sight of his comrades, who had moved a little aside so they would be safe from any loose shale which in his passage he might dislodge.

They could hear him now and then, while occasionally some small pieces of rock rattled down, but nothing of consequence followed. Once Rex stepped back and cast his eyes up along the face of the black height. Just at that moment a flash of lightning rent the darkness, as though to lend him assistance. His gaze ran up the rock and instantly became riveted on a spot where some dark object seemed to cling.

Rex was almost positive that he could make out the form of a man flattened against the scarred gneiss, but the electric current went with the same swiftness that marked its coming. However, it mattered not—Bludsoe was progressing, else would he have warned them against his failure.

Five, ten minutes crept along, with an occasional illumination from heaven's battery. Those below waited and speculated in whispers. Then a low bird-like whistle came to their ears from above—Jim's signal for the world.

"Look for the rope!" said Lord Bruno, and each man went groping along at the foot of the cliff, seeking to discover the trailing lariat.

Little Phil's exclamation quickly brought the others to his side—the rope was found.

Now came the task which each in turn must undertake. Bludsoe had discovered some projecting shelf part way up the face of the rocky wall, and wished them to join him.

One by one they made the ascent, without any ac-

cident, for with the rope it was a much easier task than Jim had undertaken. Besides, when some one has done the pioneer work, those who follow need not worry about possible contingencies.

Red Eric waited until the last, for the ruling passion was strong within them, and having risked their lives for these quaint images and vessels of gold, they were bound to hang on to them as long as possible. So he sent them up in two lots, willing arms above dragging the heavily laden saddle bags cheerfully through space.

Then the last of the Mohicans coolly put his foot in the loop of the lariat, gave the signal, and was hoisted aloft. Doubtless those who strained and tugged at the rope must have imagined the treasure trove had increased vastly in volume since they carried the bags, or it might be they guessed the true inwardness of the affair long ere Red Eric's flaming crown appeared over the brink of the platform which their leader had made use of as a species of relay station.

At least they were all together again, though quite in ignorance as to what new troubles might be in store for them.

The ledge seemed to extend some distance in one direction, though its presence might not be suspected, even by the keenest eyes below.

Above them the wall still reared its massive crest, nor did it seem to offer quite as good opportunities to the daring climber.

Jim was of the opinion that they would do well to make a tour of observation before tackling the job, for indeed it promised additional dangers, and little chances of *ultimate* success.

Time had been consumed in all this business. They

must not imagine their enemies had been asleep while the minutes passed.

Across the way a fire had been started on the heights, and they could see numerous figures passing and re-passing. Presently it was discovered that some means of communication had been effected with the bottom of the crater, for figure after figure was seen to approach the brink and suddenly vanish. Perhaps a long rope had been brought into service, or else a series of ladders, the presence of which had been unknown to the fugitives of Krokato.

The truth of this reasoning became evident when lights appeared amid the scrub bushes around the entrance to the ancient temple—lights that flashed hither and yon like giant fireflies of the tropics, constantly increasing in number until they spread in a line directly across the crater, steadily advancing across from wall to wall.

How the black legions discovered the facts, unless able with savage cunning to follow a blind trail, it would be hard indeed to say, but no matter—it was only a brief time before they had gathered at the foot of the cliff directly under the shelf upon which the little company of adventurers had found lodgment, and their fierce outcries warned the whites that their position was accurately known.

CHAPTER XVI.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

BLUDSOE was fain to lay it all to the witch-doctor, who had been able through his knowledge of the Black Arts to divine whither they had flown—at least he so expressed himself, and swore upon the first opportunity to clear up his reckoning with this arrant old humbug of a magician.

In his own mind the cowboy knew better than this, realizing that it was the exercise of remarkable sagacity in the line of trailers that had achieved such a result for the war blacks.

The situation was far from cheerful, and it certainly required pluck of no ordinary calibre in order to face the music without flinching.

Silence was a thing of the past, for when heaven's artillery deigned to refrain from bombarding their ears with a series of terrific explosions, the black warriors were exchanging signals with those of their ilk on the top of the cliff.

To ascend was no longer the one ambition of the adventurers, since it was evident that should they arrive at the top after a most arduous and dangerous climb it would only be to face death at the hands of the waiting Zambodi warriors whose assegais had been whetted for bloody service.

What then?

Between the upper and the nether stone they seemed

in danger of being pulverized. Indeed, some plan of action appeared to have been arranged between the two wings of the hostile army, for presently stones began to crash downward from the heights, stones that were both large and small, and which increased in number until it seemed as though from the murky heavens this deluge must proceed.

They scarred the ledge here, there and everywhere—they chipped off pieces of the gneiss as though with the blow of a trip-hammer, such was the tremendous power gained by their downward plunge.

It would seem almost miraculous that any living being could remain upon that shelf and exist, but thanks to the formation of the cliff in one place, where the rock was hollowed out, they were able to flatten themselves beyond the danger line, and wait for the furious bombardment to cease.

Whether the energetic fellows above had used up all the available supply of loose trap-rock, or fondly believed they must have pulverized their enemies by this time, the shower of descending missiles finally grew less in volume, until at last, some signal caused it to cease altogether.

Jim Bludsoe crept forth to reconnoitre, and the rest awaited his report.

He was gone five, ten minutes, and they began to grow a trifle anxious.

In whispers they consulted as to the best move they could make in order to outwit the black wolves who howled for their blood; but it was a hard nut to crack, and the puzzle could not be solved until they heard the cowboy's report.

And as they crouched there, listening and waiting, a

sharp sibilant hiss from Red Eric warned them of impending danger.

Rex had hardly raised his head than his attention was attracted by some moving object that came between the clouded sky and his eyes, an object that quickly resolved itself into a wriggling human figure dangling at the end of a rope.

Of course it was a daring Zambodi scout, sent down by those above to ascertain the true status of affairs on the ledge.

Lower came the fellow. Of course his eyes were strained to discover any evidence of human presence around him, but he would have needed the eyes of a feline to have made out the shadowy forms against the black rock.

Just then, as though in a vicious mood, the electric plant of nature took particular pains to send a zigzag bolt earthward somewhere among the hills, and the whole scene was illuminated as by a magician's wand.

The dangling warrior's face was turned directly toward that line of crouching figures, and such was the amazing brightness of the heavenly torch that Rex could distinctly see the look of sudden fierce joy that flashed over his cruel features as he discovered where the covey of fugitives had found refuge.

There was no time to see more, for darkness succeeded, so deep and profound after the passing of that dazzling white light, that Rex seemed suddenly stricken blind.

He felt Red Eric spring from his side, and could give a shrewd guess as to the nature of his mission, *so that he was not very much surprised when almost immediately on the heels of this movement there came*

a shriek of mortal agony that started on a line with the ledge and ended fully thirty feet below, to be quickly followed by a dull shock, full of the most dreadful possibilities.

The danger from that source was no more.

Another shower of rocks might be looked for, but failed to materialize, which was pretty good proof that their enemies had other game in prospect.

Then Bludsoe put in an appearance, and without vouchsafing any information bade them follow him, which they of course did with alacrity, believing he must have made a discovery of some consequence to account for his actions.

The ledge proved of considerable length, and yet there was but a small portion of it that was not subject to the bombardment of the Philistines, which proved what a streak of good luck had been theirs when they found such convenient shelter from the storm of weighty missiles that had recently poured down upon the shelf from above.

Rex was moving along, one hand upon the wall for guidance, when without the least warning in the world his fingers clutched vacancy.

He received quite a shock, under the impression that he was on the brink, and for the moment dared not move lest by even the slightest action in the world he precipitate the catastrophe that seemed impending, for he doubted not but that he was upon the ragged edge of an unfathomable gulf; and though the stupendous fortune contained in the pockets of his coat might buoy up his spirits and lighten his heart when clouds weighed heavily upon him, he could not expect it to *take wings and waft him gently to solid earth below.*

But some one passed him by—it was the eager Englishman, Lord Bruno. At about the same time he heard a whisper which he readily recognized as coming from Bludsoe—a whisper that set his mind at rest.

“Behold—a yawning cave!” was what the cowboy said, for be it known Jim could at times be truthfully suspected of budding dramatic genius, possibly due to the influence of Buffalo Bill, in whose Wild West Bludsoe had for several seasons borne part as the gallant leader of the rescuing cattle-rustlers, until the monotony of the daily grind for pay became too much for his adventurous spirit to longer endure, so that he had set out in quest of adventure, somewhat after the fashion of the illustrious Spanish gentleman of La Mancha, only Jim’s exploits were of the genuine type, and not with windmill giants.

The discovery of the cave at least promised something of mystery, for no one as yet knew anything about its dimensions, where it ran, or whether there was a chance of ultimate escape through its means.

When they had crept cautiously along some little distance, it was decided that the danger of a light being seen by their enemies was reduced to a minimum, and so after a brief struggle a torch was induced to take fire. One and all they mentally blessed that wise forethought which induced Jim to cling to his lightwood, though had it come to the worst Lord Bruno could have produced a little more flash-light powder from the satchel, carried with a strap over the shoulder, as one might his field glasses.

Hardly had the bit of resinous wood commenced to *send forth* a flame that dissipated the dense darkness, *than six* pairs of eager eyes were cast about in the en-

deavor to discover what species of place this strange slit in the gneiss adamantine wall might prove to be, and learn, if possible, what chances of ultimate escape it presented.

Rex saw nothing beyond the bare rough walls some six or seven feet apart, and the black shadows marking the limit of the torch's power of illumination overhead.

He heard an exclamation beside him, and there was Red Eric, holding something which he had just snatched up, and which appeared to be the white thigh bone of some animal.

It was not the only remnant of its kind to be seen, for as Hastings glanced down in the direction of the stone floor his eye was attracted by quite a collection in that line, evidently the remains of many a feast on the part of some wild beast.

As yet he failed to comprehend why the cattle-punchers seemed so pleased. In his eyes the discovery of these bones indicated nothing pleasant—indeed, he felt a shiver pass over him at the thought that possibly their own remains might some day be found by similar bold explorers, perhaps a century hence, and most profound treatises be written based upon the mystery of their presence in that strange cavern leading from old Krokato's crater.

"That settles it," remarked Jim, nodding his head in a complacent manner, which served to confound Rex more than ever.

Fortunately the next words that were uttered served to throw a gleam of light over the mystery, and he was positively charmed to think he had not spoken and betrayed his dense ignorance of cowboy lore.

"Well, if a beast could at some time have had his den in this place, we ought to be able to discover which way he went in and out, and I'm very sure it wasn't by the road we took in coming here," laughed Lord Bruno.

As Rex remembered that tremendous climb to reach the shelf, he was ready to echo this declaration on the part of the artist rover.

They halted not upon the order of their going, but struck out. There was danger hovering in their rear. The blacks might take it into their miserable heads to swarm down the face of the wall, either by the aid of ropes, or simply utilizing their monkey-like ability to cling fast to the rocks; but if once the platform was reached it would not take long to have them on the heels of the fugitives, whose first warning of their proximity might be the whirr of steel-shod shafts tipped with quick death.

So they pushed eagerly on, following the course of the subterranean channel, hoping that presently they might discover an exit which would relieve their anxieties.

Ever and anon Bludsoe, cautious Jim of the prairies, would come to a halt in order to listen; and Rex could not but notice that he seemed more concerned with what might occur in their rear than the unknown depths before, which they were yet to pierce.

So far as Hastings could tell, the only sounds that came to them were the old familiar flutter of frightened bats' Satanic wings, as they beat the air in a frantic rush to escape from the hated light; but the practiced ears of the cowboy ere long detected something more *than this*, if the nervous way in which he played with

the revolver he held in his hand was any criterion, and one could guess the meaning of his more frequent backward glances.

They were pursued, and the blacks, as if to keep their courage up, were giving tongue occasionally, like a pack of hounds.

"Faster!" said Lord Bruno, mentally calculating on the chances of a ruction in the narrow chamber they were traversing.

Evidently matters were drawing perilously near a crisis of some sort, though the wonder of it was how their enemies could make better progress in the dark than they did by the aid of the torch, and Red Eric voiced the impression of them all when he muttered something to the effect that the rascals must have cat's eyes.

Judging from the distance they had covered, it would seem as though they must surely be near the other side of the ancient volcano, and eyes were strained to discover some sign of an outlet.

Louder grew the shouts from the rear, and Bludsoe suddenly discovered there were lights in that quarter, which fact explained several things that had appeared strange.

"There's no use talking, we must turn at bay and show our teeth," he declared, and no man ventured to argue the matter.

So the friendly torch was dropped under their feet and trampled upon until the last spark had been stamped out.

Then low words of command were given and the little group of African argonauts threw themselves almost flat, each man taking advantage of what cover

fortune threw in his way, perhaps an out cropping rock, or if nothing better, the saddlebags laden with gold. Rex, crouching there with this barrier in front wondered whether in the history of the world any other man than himself had ever been given a chance to do battle from behind such a precious rampart.

They were granted little time for speculation as to the possible outcome.

Their pursuers came on with the speed of men who meant business. Several waved torches above their heads, while numerous other dusky figures flitted behind.

A more startling picture could not well be conceived than was presented by these fantastic Zambodi warriors, decked in all the panoply of the warpath, with their ugly black faces painted to resemble fiends of Tophet, and brandishing weapons and torches while they covered ground with tremendous leaps.

Fortunately there were hearts of steel in that little company, and they faced this deadly peril without a quiver.

Jim was to give the word. He had directed them to spare the link-bearers with the first tornado of lead, so that light might be afforded them to do as much damage as possible, which course stamped the cowboy a natural leader of men in time of battle.

Closer still, until the very whites of the leader's eyes could be seen in the weird glare of the blazing torches—had Bludsoe forgotten to give the word, or was he paralyzed?

"Now!" suddenly rang out, and the exclamation was *drowned in the awful crash of six revolvers, flashing out their fiery contents.*

The scene was one that almost beggars description—with the shrieking black devils waving their flambeaux and hurling assegais and spears toward their unseen foes, it was not unlike a page from the history of the Inferno as pictured by the pencil of a Dante.

The roar of firearms again awoke a thousand echoes in the confined space. It was as though some thunder-bolt, forged by immortal Jove, had been hurled upon the earth to be shattered into fragments.

Men were sent bowling down—some fell to lie there like logs, while others rolled over, or else attempted to scramble to their feet, still filled with the battle fervor, since more daring souls do not live than these black barbarians, fetish worshippers that they are.

And the terrible flashes continued to cut the darkness beyond, each seeming like the fiery tongue of some monster serpent that lay in wait to receive the invaders of this haunted passage; while the cruel messengers of lead tore through the ranks of the assailants.

Flesh and blood could stand it no longer. The Zambodi had borne up under the storm with a bravery that would have done credit to the Old Guard of Napoleon, but there was a limit to their valor.

Those who were able turned and fled in terror. The torch-bearers even forgot to throw down their lights, and thus screen their retreat; but a considerate foe refused to fire after them once the victory was won.

“How is it with you, boys?” shouted Lord Bruno, making himself heard above the wild death chants of a couple of wounded braves, who doubtless fully expected the first move of the victors would be to knock them on the head, since those were the ethics prevailing among the Zulu races of South Africa.

Reassuring replies came from all sides.

The murderous assegais with their keen points often dipped in poison, had found no victims, thanks to the sheltering ramparts, and the fact that they were cast at random, in the midst of tremendous excitement.

Quick and sharp came Bludsoe's directions, and taking hold of hands for additional security the little party again moved forward.

What lay before them was utterly unknown, since the most intense darkness reigned.

At any moment they might stumble into a gulf the counterpart of that which swallowed up the wretched black scout.

This caused a fearful strain upon their nervous systems, and presently the cowboy refused to sanction it longer.

"We must have light," he declared, firmly.

So the torch was again brought out, and Jim had drawn forth a match which he meant to use in starting a little fire, when an exclamation from Phil directed their attention beyond. No sooner had Bludsoe turned his eyes in the quarter indicated than he cried out in joy:

"The opening of this devil's hole, boys, thank God!"

BOOK III.

THE FAIR ORACLE OF THE ZAMBODI.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN DURANCE VILE.

A FAINT light had been discovered, which they could reasonably presume came from the Zambodi kraal, and as they drew nearer, the outlines of the mouth of the cavern became visible.

Of course Jim no longer desired to ignite his torch, since the chances were it might betray them to the enemy.

In five minutes they had gained the opening and the scene was spread before them.

Darkness still wrapped the earth in her sable mantle, and while an occasional flash came from the clouds, the rumble of thunder seemed more distant, as though the storm had gone around—indeed, at this time of year such a disturbance was singular enough to attract more than passing notice, since it corresponds to our December in latitudes north of the equator.

Before them was the great kraal of the warlike blacks. Fires burned in many places, and the most intense excitement reigned.

Loud rolled the war drum, and savage shouts from men and women and even children testified to the tre-

mendous influence the presence of our little party had upon the self-constituted guardians of the sacred crater.

Even Bludsoe looked upon the exciting scene with unusual interest. It reminded him of a disturbed beehive, or a giant ant-hill into which a pole had been violently thrust.

"Well, the sooner we get out of this region the better for our health," remarked Lord Bruno, as his eye detected the swarming masses of blacks moving to and fro, many of them passing up the side of the hill as if ordered to join those who had gone to do battle with the profaners of the temple.

"My part of the mission has been completed, but how about yours?" asked Rex.

"Possibly it may have to wait until a more convenient season," was the reply of a practical man, accustomed to governing his actions by the conditions that prevailed.

At any rate it was exceedingly perilous for them to remain where they were, since danger menaced them from several quarters.

Bludsoe crept outside to take an observation and presently rejoined them.

"What are the prospects?" demanded Lord Bruno, as the cowboy came back.

"Bad enough, sir. We're on a shelf again, as it were. To go up is impossible, and I don't see how we can pass down except by using our lariats."

"But the wild beast——"

"Never came in this way—we must have missed *his* road, I reckon. It's too late now to go back and search *for it*. Get your ropes ready, pards, for we'll need 'em *both*."

Always prompt and reliable, Jim set to work in the endeavor to unravel the tangle that now threatened their future.

The double lasso was lowered, with Red Eric as ballast, and he signaled that all was right when his feet struck solid ground below. One by one they went down, taking the heavy saddlebags of gold along.

Jim was last, Jim, upon whom devolved the task of saving the ropes, which might even again come in very handy in assisting them when disaster threatened.

Bludsoe doubled the rope and passing down to its limit found a projecting rock which served as a spur, upon which he again repeated his tactics and reached his comrades in safety, when a pull upon one end of the rope recovered it.

They found themselves against the cliff, between which and the kraal the impis had conducted their fantastic war-dance under the direction of the witch-doctor.

The situation was full of danger, since at any moment discovery might come. At the same time they were bound to move in spite of a thousand aggressive warriors.

One and all were united with regard to their proper course, for it was easy to decide in which quarter the doctor awaited their coming.

They made a start, and began creeping along at the foot of the cliff, looking like ghouls from another world.

More than once Bludsoe muttered savage anathemas against the fires upon which the children of the kraal were heaping all the inflammable rubbish they could collect, to the imminent danger of a grand conflagration, should the grass conical huts once start burning.

This illumination served to increase the danger of discovery; but a thousand fires would not have kept them back, now that their course had been marked out.

Foot by foot they moved along, while the pandemonium seemed to increase with each passing minute. Perhaps the Zambodi believed in the gospel of noise, and were accustomed to placing as much reliance upon lung power in battle as the force of arms.

An unfortunate event precipitated discovery, and though the fellow whose eyes first sighted the six creeping forms went speedily to the barbarian's paradise, since Bludsoe caught him in an iron grip, his note of warning was taken up by others, so that a rush was made from various quarters, the oncoming impis resembling the spokes of a wheel of which our friends, much to their regret, represented the hub.

Discretion could now be thrown to the wind—speed and valor were the only things that would save them.

Bludsoe gave the word, and throwing aside the mask they sprang forward.

Higher leaped the flames, until the whole region was illuminated. If the clamor had been deafening before, it was now simply diabolical, since every inmate of the kraal seemed to be uttering ear-splitting shouts and shrieks. Half a hundred factory whistles of all keys might have equaled the noise thrown off by the Zambodi when the hunted whites came into full view.

Jim led them well, taking advantage of every opportunity to save a yard.

Twice they were compelled to turn at bay and drive back some advance squad of the enemy, that had forged *ahead of the rest* and threatened to close in upon them.

The saddlebags were heavy, yet with a strange obsti-

nacy that was next to madness they refused to abandon the gold.

Rex soon found himself compelled to slip off his coat and carry it on his arm, since it was easier to run in that way. Once he stumbled and fell. Lord Bruno turned to assist him, half expecting to see the shaft of an assegai sticking out between his shoulders; but Rex staggered to his feet, at which the Englishman snatched up his coat and held out a hand.

"Take hold, my dear fellow!" he cried, but Hastings, although somewhat winded, was too proud to accept assistance, at least as yet.

"I'm all right—don't stop!" he gasped.

And the mad flight was resumed.

In such a strange way did Lord Bruno chance to become possessed of his friend's coat, and when subsequent events are taken into consideration this little accident must be set down as a wonderful exposition of the way in which fortune favors her votaries, since Rex had both side pockets of that same garment actually stuffed with precious gems, just as a turkey might be puffed out at Christmas-tide.

Fate was not yet done buffeting young Hastings about, but had another experience in store for him that would prove as novel in its way as anything he could remember.

Again the blacks swarmed forward, this time in greater numbers than before. It was positively necessary that the fugitives turn at bay and drive them away.

Once more came the quick percussion of revolver shots, punctuating the hideous clamor that made night dreadful. Each discharge meant a result, for these men

were hardly the ones to throw away their ammunition when life and death hung in the scales.

They drove the enemy back, though several of the warriors, fearlessly intercepting the fugitives, had to be met in personal encounter before the way was cleared.

Red Eric had several wounds, Bludsoe came within an ace of being spitted upon an assegai and Lord Bruno found a piece chipped from his arm by the terrible flight of the same species of weapon. They were all present when the desperate rush was resumed. Pellmell they went over the ground, their only hope being to reach the horses and once mounted leave the enraged blacks in the lurch.

Rex was in the rear, but close up, when he caught his foot in some obstacle and fell heavily to the ground. After that all was a blank to him for some time.

When he recovered consciousness, it puzzled the young adventurer to guess where he could be. Darkness surrounded him, and he seemed paralyzed, since upon trying to move hand or foot, he could not.

Sounds rang in his ears, sounds that might have done credit to the imps of the lower regions; and indeed, Rex began to seriously question whether he might not have been transported to the Land of Shades, when the whole truth dawned upon him, and he realized he must be a prisoner of the fierce Zambodi.

It was a position to arouse apprehension.

Though the blacks were not cannibals, their reputation for cruelty toward those whom the fortune of war threw into their power, was well known. Fiends could not invent more devilish methods of torture than those *devised by the witch-doctors*, whose business it was to *appease the anger* of the terrible black god whose favor

they sought, the demon whose voice rolled in the thunder peals, and the lightning of whose eye shot down from the clouds when he was angry.

Hastings would need all his grit to meet the experience in store for him. With true Anglo-Saxon valor, his thoughts began to grapple with the subject of escape, for he was one of the "never say die" kind of men.

The sounds around his place of confinement did not alleviate his anticipations of evil. So far as he could make out they were wails of mourning, doubtless over the bodies of the slain warriors, and awful shouts for immediate vengeance upon the prisoner.

Hastings worked with frantic eagerness, having discovered that the withes with which his arms were bound had not been secured in a positive manner, and his energy in this quarter speedily met with its reward, since he found a way to free his hands.

A hasty search of his person failed to reveal the presence of a knife that would have been of inestimable value just now.

Apparently his captors had searched his pockets when he fell into their power. Rex might feel grateful they had not carried their investigations still further, and sought to discover where his heart lay. It was something of a fad among the fierce Matabele and their allies to tear the still beating fountain of life from the breast of a fallen foeman, and thrust it in his face as he died.

As a result of Hastings' quick search, all he found was a small pocket match safe, which had escaped the marauder's hands. Even this suggested a desperate idea in his fertile brain, which he lost not

second in attempting. When a man is drowning he will catch most eagerly at a straw, which perhaps under such conditions is magnified to the dimensions of a goodly log.

It were worth while to note the calm deliberation with which the American in durance vile set to work.

He sat up, bracing his back against the wall of the rude lodge, and then igniting one of the matches, deliberately applied the flame to the withes that secured his limbs.

A cord would have given way at once, but the willow-like band was green, and he had to use three matches before it began to weaken.

Rex had just started the fourth, which he believed would finish the business, when he heard some one push aside the suspended mat made of braided grass that served as a door.

Startled, he looked up, at the same instant by a muscular *coup de grace* bursting his limbs from their lashings, so that he found himself in a condition to spring upon the intruder and battle for his life; but he did not move hand or foot, for by the light of the match he still held he discovered that the person who had entered the lodge was no other than the fair barbarian goddess whose song had enchanted him once before.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WALKULLA, THE MAN-OF-WAR.

THE match went out.

Darkness again held sway in that prison lodge in the heart of the Zambodi kraal. The shouts and cries of mourning seemed to partially die away about this time, perhaps to gain additional volume when the chorus swelled again later on.

Rex had managed to pull himself together, which to be sure required quite an effort, for he had nerved himself to meet the desperate rush of a savage foeman, and on the contrary discovered his visitor to be the one person in all the village whom he would if given a choice have selected as his *vis-a-vis*.

He had seen the startled look upon her face as she beheld his singular action in burning the bands that secured his limbs. Hardly had the gloom again shrouded the interior of the hut than he heard a low voice that said:

"Sir, do not be alarmed—I have come here as your friend."

"Well," returned the American, quickly, "it looks as though I needed a friend just now, and I thank you for coming, miss."

She gained new confidence, and Rex, having risen, presently felt her hand on his arm. Of course the touch thrilled him as no other had ever done before. *Some of these things are foregone conclusions, and th*

reader would be dense indeed who could not see the way the finger of destiny pointed when the first mention was made of a mysterious beautiful oracle, whose strange presence among the warlike tribe of Zambodi drew Rex Hastings back to face again the dangers that lurked among the kopjes near the hidden temple where the three-headed god had held sway, lo, these many centuries past.

"Who are you, and why have you returned again after once escaping from this place?" she asked him, for knowing the fanatic hatred which these blacks conceived for the whites of the border, it was very natural she should be puzzled to account for his suicidal policy.

It was a strange place for an interview, with the impis howling outside and demanding his immediate death, and Rex appreciated the novel situation.

"My name is Rex Hastings. I had come here in search of a treasure the secret of which was given to me as a legacy. That was when I first saw you. Since then I have returned with a friend whose purpose in visiting this hostile region was to meet you, for he seemed to have some notion that you belonged to him—at least that was what I gathered from his talk," with some confusion, not knowing how she would take it.

"Tell me his name," she flashed, and when he mentioned it she uttered a cry of mingled surprise and dismay.

"It is not strange to you, then?" he asked.

"No, but this is the man against whom I was warned by my father."

"Then he warned you falsely, for a nobler comrade

and brother than Lord Bruno never struck Johannesburg. But where is this man you call your father—surely not here?”

“Ah! he did live here, but he has gone to the other world. Once he was a prophet among this superstitious people, ruling them through his knowledge of magic. But he died, and left me alone. I had learned to practice his wizard tricks, and they believe his spirit lives in me. You have seen them prostrate before me. Yes, I am looked upon as a god, an oracle because I have brought men from the verge of death back to life by the use of simple remedies when the witch-doctors gave them up for hopeless. I go and I come at will, having my face veiled, and no one dares to touch me. I have yearned for freedom, longed to see my kindred again, and of late my mind has been wholly taken up with plans for escape.”

It may be readily understood that Rex listened to her brief story with the keenest interest.

Events seemed shaping themselves in a manner little short of magical, and when fortune takes charge of the helm it is only folly for any human to express a desire to steer the craft of the argonaut.

“Then if the chance offers you will go with us?” he asked, eagerly, just as if he had a sturdy army of colonists and raiders of the dashing Jameson type waiting close by, when the chances were his little group of friends had either been slain by the assegais of the blacks or else driven out of the neighborhood.

“Gladly, sir. This life has become too decidedly monotonous. I shall die if I do not soon see human beings other than rude savages, even if they do treat me as a god. Besides—there is another reason why I

must escape—but it does not matter now. We must consider how you are to get out of this death trap.”

“And you also!” he added, quickly.

“Do not think of me at present, since I am not in deadly peril. If the chance comes I will seize it; but you must go. First of all you shall become one of them.”

“Meaning that the leopard should change his spots—that is a difficult task, I fear.”

“Perhaps not so serious as it would seem. At least I have here the means of coloring your face and hands, so that at a glance you might not attract attention. Then here are other things if you care to use them, that will assist the deception. I will wait just outside in the shadow of the lodge, where you can join me. They believe you tied so securely that no guards have been posted. Lose no time, sir, for if ever you had need of haste it is now.”

How direct to the point she spoke. Rex could not but notice it, even under the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the case.

He was compelled to work in the dark, but when life is the stake for which he plays, a man is capable of astonishing things, and in a very brief space of time the argonaut had transformed himself into a creditable warrior of the Zambodi tribe, though his rather heterogeneous costume would hardly have borne a close examination.

This done Rex was ready to make his debut in the ridiculous character he had assumed, although were the issues of the campaign less grave he might have felt *some delicacy* about appearing before that queenly girl *in such unbecoming undress*; for while retaining his

trousers and shoes he had stripped to the waist, and smeared himself as best he could with the greasy compound she left him, so that taken in all he must have presented a formidable appearance after donning the cape of plumes and necklet of teeth, together with the tails of animals dangling from his waist to his feet.

Thus arrayed Hastings made for the exit of the prison lodge, which the girl had so arranged upon her departure as to give him a small amount of light.

Upon emerging, his first act was to sweep a glance around. It could not reassure him to any extent. He saw scores of these cone-shaped lodges on every hand crowded very close together, and between them moving figures, each one of which he knew to be an enemy.

Beyond these he remembered lay the stockade of the kraal, and then—the wilderness. Really, a man must possess a stout heart who dared dream of escape when environed by such discouraging conditions.

He went even further and entertained the notion not only of escaping himself but of taking the fair barbarian with him. What is impossible to a spirit of that calibre?

As Hastings turned the corner of the lodge, he reached that side away from the nearest fire. Here the shadows lay thickest, and here he was to look for his fair benefactress. That she did not immediately appear he laid to his ferocious make-up as a full fledged warrior of the Zambodi, and desiring to reassure her he said aloud:

“I am ready!”

Then a figure, coming from he knew not where, appeared at his side, and touched his arm. She was dressed in black, and with a veil over her wondrous

face appeared like a phantom, whereas in white he had deemed her an angel.

A sense of his remarkable appearance almost overwhelmed Rex, and he mentally thanked the friendly shadows that in a great measure concealed his savage garb. He felt more foolish than at any time in the whole course of his life.

However, a man can undergo varied experiences and still live to tell the tale, and by degrees he became, in a measure at least, accustomed to the peculiar rôle fate had marked out for him.

The girl made no comment—possibly because she was quite accustomed to the sight of Zulu and Matabele and Zambodi warriors in all their weird toggery, since she must have spent years among them.

“We must lose no time, sir—you can hear those savage shouts rising higher all the while. That comes from the widows of the warriors lately slain by your friends. They are singing your death song,” she said.

“Come, that is pleasant,” remarked Rex, as the chant reached such a ferocious pitch as to send a shudder over him.

“Presently, when they have succeeded in working themselves up to a pitch of demoniac fury, a rush will be made for the prison lodge, with the intention of dragging you out and tearing you to pieces.”

“Regular Amazons, I guess; which makes me feel doubly under obligations to you, my good friend. If you will lead the way I shall follow close behind.”

“You have the weapons I left—we must hope and pray there will be no occasion to use them; but remember, it is your life that is at stake.”

“*There’s small danger of my forgetting that,*” an-

swered Hastings, as he moved away just a few steps behind her.

He grasped in his hand an assegai, but the weapon did not give him half the pleasure that sprang from the possession of his own revolver, hidden under the ring of cat-tails around his waist, though how she had managed to secure this treasure was a mystery that puzzled him greatly.

In and out among the lodges they passed, without attracting attention, thanks to the amazing disguise of Rex.

He could see men and women give way before his guide, shrinking back as soon as they caught sight of her sombre garb and in secret Hastings chuckled to think what a great thing it was to have a goddess for a guardian, whose presence caused many to throw themselves prostrate, and thus kept curious eyes from too searching a survey of his person.

The girl while heading for the gates of the kraal, was wise enough to avoid as far as possible any piles of burning wood, which fact Rex could not but note with exceeding pleasure.

His attention was directed toward a group of females indulging in a series of contortions that would have put the best warrior to the blush, all the while shrieking as they tore their hair, in the utter abandonment of grief and unholy rage.

That was not a very pleasing sight for Rex to gaze upon, realizing as he did that these frantic souls were the widows who longed to avenge their loss by tearing him limb from limb.

On the whole he was quite satisfied to leave these

warm friends in the lurch, since their interests in his welfare was decidedly too personal.

Thus moving along they drew near the gate of the stockade. Rex remembered how he had seen the river of dancing blacks come pouring forth like a living stream, as they advanced in obedience to the tom-tom signal that called them to the war dance.

Once outside the gate the chances of discovery would be considerably lessened, although he was puzzled to know how their ultimate escape might be effected.

Perhaps she meant to secrete him in the depth of some lonely cavern until the hunt had been given up, when they might arrange to depart together.

Her presence was an incentive to him and he was ready to follow her lead without a question, no matter through what danger she might take him.

There were times when he almost rubbed elbows with stalwart warriors in his passage, and more than once guttural words were spoken, doubtless addressed to him, but he only returned a shake of the head and strode onward, for the language of the Zambodi was worse than Greek to him.

All seemed going well.

The gates were at hand, and open, for warriors came and went, since the advent of the white argonauts had dispelled sleep within the kraal for this night at least.

It was just at this juncture Rex awakened to the fact that trouble lay in store for him. His attention was first directed to the actions of his girl guide, whom he saw turn her head several times, as though peering through her veil toward that side of the kraal nearest the foot of the hill.

His attention being thus directed thither he became

aware of the fact that a moving figure was keeping on a line with them.

It was a Zambodi, in full war-dress, though he carried no rhinoceros hide shield. Something in the dancing plumes told Rex he had seen him before, and then he remembered that among the dancers had been one more agile than all the rest, whom Jim Bludsoe marked as the head war chief of the tribe.

What caused him to act in this manner?

Were his suspicions aroused by something lacking in the walk of the disguised paleface?

Upon looking more closely Rex noticed that as yet the ferocious war chief seemed to pay but very little attention to him. His eyes were glued upon the gliding figure of the fair god.

Then light broke in upon his mind, and he began to grasp the true inwardness of the situation.

This great warrior, who had doubtless gained his position through his prowess in the chase, and in time of battle, had dared to presume so far as to fall in love with the beautiful being whom his tribe had set up as a thing to be worshipped.

At the bare thought Rex felt his blood boil within him. Perhaps the time that had elapsed since his first meeting with this fair maid of the wilderness had been exceedingly brief, but it was not jealousy that sprang to arms so much as the sense of repulsion at the bare thought of one so lovely being wooed by a savage.

He gripped his assegai more fiercely and gritted his teeth in a significant way that boded no good toward the war chief should they come to blows in the near future.

"I'll keep an eye on you, my hearty, and if you show your hand look out for squalls," was what he muttered.

Thus they passed through the gates.

Rex breathed freer when this occurred, for it was a relief to find himself beyond the limit of those everlasting conical lodges forming streets and lanes that were crowded with excited throngs of the Zambodi.

He was keeping watch and ward upon the war chief, and noticed that Walkulla had moved closer to the girl.

Evidently the stalwart Zambodi had also discovered his presence, and begun to suspect he had a rival in the field—at least Rex saw him glance toward him several times, and once the war chief made an imperious gesture which being interpreted might mean that he was to betake himself off without delay.

The fact that the unknown brave did not appear to notice his mute command seemed to further enrage the chief.

A climax was inevitable.

Beyond them lay the remains of a fire, the ashes still throwing out a dull red glow, and her course promised to take them close by these glowing coals.

As if making up his mind to bring matters to a focus, Walkulla hastened his steps.

So did Rex.

Thus the three came together just beside the smouldering coals of the late council-fire.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DUEL UNDER THE STOCKADE OF THE KRAAL.

THE war chief spoke to the girl—his language seemed warm to Rex, even though he failed to understand its tenor. He believed Walkulla had allowed his passion for the fair god to overcome the reverence he was expected to pay her as a deity.

As he talked rapidly he made extravagant gestures. Rex could not but note his graceful carriage, and his stalwart form, even while critically eying his figure as might an athlete in the Roman arena, upon discovering a gladiator with whom he believed the fates were destined to speedily throw him in personal contact.

She answered the war chief in his own strange tongue, which she spoke fluently, but her cold manner, perhaps the stinging rebuke in her words, did little toward quenching the new fever that had begun to run amuck in Walkulla's veins.

That fever was jealousy.

It finds lodgment in the breasts of untutored savages as well as among people of cultivation and refinement—indeed, the closer we draw to the natural state the more prominent does this failing appear.

The war chief seemed to be unsatisfied by the answers she made, for he suddenly whirled upon Hastings.

What he said could not be written—the English language does not contain sounds with which to express Zambodi words.

And indeed, Rex could only faintly guess the meaning of the tirade. Did some learned linguist fire a torrent of phrases from Sanscrit or another dead language at his poor head, he could grapple with it just as successfully as with what Walkulla declaimed.

Perhaps the war chief demanded why he dared follow the fair god when she ventured to walk forth, or it might be he went even further and threatened all manner of evil if the venturesome warrior ever again cast an envious eye upon his prize.

Hastings ventured upon no response. It was not that the impassioned harangue had taken away his power of speech, but his inability to grapple with the Zambodi tongue made him just as helpless with regard to replying as he had been in understanding the drift of the torrent poured upon his head.

His silence showed considerable discretion, though it evidently inflamed the anger of the chief, who pressed him with what appeared to be another question, if one could judge from the rising inflection.

Rex remained as mute as the sphinx that surveys the Egyptian desert under the shadow of Pharaoh's pyramids.

At the same time he prepared for the worst.

Walkulla, despairing of drawing a reply from his mute unknown rival, tried other tactics, which proved somewhat more successful in discovering life in the black statue.

He suddenly bent forward and thrusting out his hand caught the other's nose between his fingers and gave it a vicious pinch that brought the tears to Hastings' eyes.

That was quite enough.

Walkulla accomplished his end, though the result may have somewhat surprised him.

Such an insult no self-respecting argonaut could put up with, and the pugnacious spirit that prompts every Anglo-Saxon to use his hands in a like emergency, caused Rex to land a blow squarely in the war chief's face.

It came straight from the shoulder with all the muscular vim and power of which he was capable. The Zambodi went flying backward as though shot from a gun, and landed on his back with a thump that must have caused him to see stars.

He was like a cat in his ways, and could not be kept down. As though made of India rubber he bounded to his feet. The light of the embers gave Rex a good view of his face, and such a physiognomy he never in all his life hoped to look upon again—distorted by passion, smeared with paint, and now streaked with gory stains as the effect of the sledge-hammer cut he had received.

Of course they were in for it now, since nothing but death could wipe out the insult of that blow.

Rex would certainly have avoided the encounter had he been sole, but it was thrust upon him, and he had no alternative.

A duel with a savage chieftain, enraged to a point of demoniac fury, and within a few hundred feet of the stockade surrounding his kraal, where some scores upon scores of black impis moved restlessly about, was not a consummation of his adventure devoutly to be wished.

Straight as the arrow flies from the bow, Walkulla went at him. One of these tigerish Zambodi braves springing to the attack is an object that might well in-

spire some little alarm in the stoutest breast ; but though Rex may have felt such a thrill, it did not prevent him from meeting the attack of the black as should a brave man.

Of course Rex was not an adept in the use of the assegai, but at close quarters where the weapon could not be thrown and would have to be used as a sword or spear, he hoped to successfully meet the attack of his on-rushing enemy.

Taken in all it was quite a neat little affair, and Hastings really did himself proud. Perhaps the fact that a pair of bright eyes watched every movement, and that the sympathies of the fair god were extended to him, nerved that good arm of his.

He knew something of sword play, fortunately ; and applied this acquaintance with arms to advantage.

Walkulla may have engaged in many a fierce fight in which the deadly assegai of the Zulus was employed at close quarters ; but he certainly never met an antagonist who gave him so much concern, and sprung upon him such a variety of surprises as this one.

All the same he proved himself a fighter worthy of the name, and if the tactics to which he was accustomed were met by a superior play of the keen-pointed weapon, he never once faltered nor looked over his shoulder with the air of a man who conceives the idea of retreat.

The assegais writhed and twisted like battling serpents. Rex applied his knowledge of sword tactics toward keeping his antagonist from utilizing any trick he might wish to bring into play, and Walkulla seemed *tremendously* surprised at being unable to even raise

his weapon when he saw a chance to bury its point in the unprotected breast of his enemy.

His surprise turned to amazement as he found himself several times made to give way, giant that he was, under the strategic rushes of the other.

Rex was in no humor for play.

He knew this thing had to be settled in a desperate hurry, and since the war chief was bound to accomplish his destruction if he could, Rex made up his mind to return the compliment.

Besides, his danger was very great, since at any instant a swarm of hostile blacks might come dashing out of the kraal, attracted by the clashing of arms or some signal cry to which the war chief might deign to give vent.

Walkulla dared aspire to the hand of this delightful being whom a strange destiny had made a goddess in exile—therefore Walkulla must die—it was decreed, and his the arm to write the sentence of the powers that be.

From mere defensive tactics the change to offensive was but a step.

The war chief proved game, for up to this time he had scorned to call assistance, even though one shout would have resulted in the undoing of his foe.

When Rex started the new regime the Zambodi for the first time began to have suspicions of the truth—that under the paint of his enemy's face there might lie the white skin of a hated Anglo-Saxon.

What might be deemed a startled exclamation broke from his lips, indicating that he had made a discovery.

Pressed back as he was by the rush of his adversary, *it could be seen that while he struggled against the*

threatening assegai that whirled about his head with dazzling rapidity, it was something else that caused him to fasten his keen black eyes on the arms of Hastings.

Perhaps there may have been some spot which Rex unconsciously neglected when using the ointment in the dark, and it was this patch of white skin that had riveted the native's attention.

At any rate, as he suddenly became aware of the truth, his scruples with regard to sounding the alarm vanished, and from his lips pealed a far reaching shout that echoed from crag to crag overhead.

It was Walkulla's last slogan.

Hastings had discovered his chance, and nerved to the deed by the desperate nature of his situation he sent the steel of the assegai crushing through bone and muscle, until the keen point protruded from the back of the unfortunate war chief.

The Zambodi staggered back and fell to the ground—he endeavored to once more gain his feet, while his painted face looked like that of a devil from Tophet; but the blow had been swift and sure, and Walkulla could only scowl and shriek for reinforcements.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RETREAT OF THE FAIR GOD.

To have conquered so valiant an adversary with his own weapons, was something of which young Hastings might speak with pardonable pride at some future day, always provided he survived the dangers that seemed to be gathering around his head in such limitless numbers.

Just then his one thought was escape.

No sooner did he see his determined foeman disposed of than he snatched up the assegai that had fallen from the palsied hand of Walkulla at the time the weapon of the adventurer pierced his vitals.

"Come, oh, come!" cried the girl, in an agony of apprehension, lest he should linger just a little too long, and once the blacks came sweeping through the gates to surround them, she could guess the horrible fate that must overtake this bold white man.

Really Rex needed no urging, since it was far from his intention to waste any time, in a case where every second counted.

He saw his guide start swiftly away, and being light of foot himself found little difficulty in reaching her side.

Then again in his heart he found cause to thank heaven for the friendly darkness that received their flying figures in its gentle embrace, and immediately *blotted out* all indications of their presence.

Back in the direction whence they had come there arose a mighty shout, and Rex, even while risking a stumble in the gloom, could not keep from turning his head to take a flying glance over his shoulder.

The picture that met his startled vision was doubtless an exceedingly strong one ; but it might have appealed more heartily to his artistic temperament if he had seen it from a place of safety, instead of filling the position of the hunted fox.

Again that human black stream was pouring through the gates of the kraal, with many extravagant gestures, and brandishing of arms.

The signal cry of their war chief had been heard, and to a man they obeyed his call, possibly expecting to discover a host of enemies in battle array, since the shout had been one of extreme urgency.

Leaping and tossing they kept pouring forth by scores, and advancing in the direction of the late council-fire.

As they came these warriors formed a very peculiar flying wedge, quite unlike the usual crescent or horn shape adopted by the Matabele in their attacks.

The smouldering fire seemed to leap into new life at the thunder of their approach ; as though startled from slumber flames sprang up and in a measure illuminated the scene.

As he looked, Rex saw the form of the stricken war chief stagger to his feet with the deadly assegai still fastened in his body.

If he uttered any sound it was impossible to catch it, such was the awful clamor, but there could be no mistaking the action of Walkulla as he pointed in the *direction taken by the fleeing fugitives.*

He even attempted to lead his warriors as of yore, the game spirit remaining to the last, but death had too firm a grip on his life, and ere he had taken three steps Walkulla pitched forward on his face to rise no more.

Then Bedlam was let loose.

Such fiendish yells as emanated from the throats of those Zambodi warriors as they rushed pellmell hither and thither in a mad search for their unseen foe, would have won recognition among the adherents of a modern football game. Higher praise is impossible since the supporters of rival latter-day colleges are supposed to have reached the limit of lung capacity with regard to volume of sound and variety of slogans.

The impis advanced in the shape of an open fan, extending their lines continually; but with a fair start there was at least a chance of eluding them.

Expecting to run against foes in hiding at any minute the warriors did not move as rapidly as under other conditions they might have done.

Rex discovered that his fair guide knew what her course was to be, and that she had undoubtedly mapped it all out beforehand.

His hopes increased.

What if they should throw the Zambodi off their trail, and escape—oh, the rapture of that thought—in its contemplation he even forgot the treasure contained in the side pockets of his coat, the whereabouts of which he had recently been bemoaning, since the last time he saw it, Lord Bruno had snatched it from the ground.

At least they held their own, and even that was a satisfaction to the fugitives.

The greatest danger menacing them lay in the many

small squads of warriors, returning from the hunt of the little band of argonauts—to run slap-dash into the arms of such an ambush would doubtless prove very unpleasant, to say the least.

But the fair guide was wonderfully cautious, and could hear sounds ahead that never reached Hastings' ears. Only in this way could he account for the sudden turns she would make.

They were all the while ascending the mount, and presently he began to suspect that she was taking him to some refuge where she had lived aloof from the tribe since the death of her father, whom they had regarded as a wizard.

This was soon proven to be the truth. To his startled eyes there appeared a little cabin on the side of the hill, partly hidden by encroaching trees—a structure that had been doubtless erected by the hands of the man she called her father, in the days of "Auld Lang Syne" when as a child she came with him into this wilderness, this strange man who seemed to desire to hide himself from his kind.

Nor did his surprise end there at the threshold, for as they entered he found himself amid many of the comforts of civilization, which had doubtless been brought here into the wilderness to make life more endurable for the girl.

The lodge was not untenanted. A figure sprang up and stood before them, with flashing eyes. Rex saw it was a young girl of the Zambodi tribe, though long association with the white maiden had caused her to renounce many of the strange customs of her race, and *adopt those of the whites.*

When she saw who entered she fell on her knees,

proving that in common with the rest she also worshipped at the shrine of the white beauty.

Then her wondering eyes fell on the disguised Rex, and she seemed almost overcome at the discovery; but her mistress spoke quickly to her, and she dared no longer let her eyes rest on his face, for she believed him also a god, perhaps even the terrible M'limo.

Obedying the command given her she went outside the door to watch.

And now Rex felt confused because of his heathen disguise, but he put a bold face on the matter and even laughed at it as a huge joke at his expense.

"Come," he said, with a lugubrious smile, "what would my aristocratic friends of the Racquet Club in New York say if they saw me in this war dress. Really, it gives me the queerest sensation. But whether I look like a fool or a full fledged Zambodi warrior does not matter. I am deeply in your debt, miss, and only await a fitting opportunity to repay the account."

A man may even be polite when his arms and face and chest are smeared with what might be called plum-bago, with cat-tails dangling at his waist and a feather ruff around his neck that gives him the sensation of wearing a ladies' ostrich boa—circumstances do not make the man, for a gentleman is born such and his natural instincts crop out despite contrary environments.

His eyes were fastened upon her face, as though it exceeded his power to withdraw them. Who could blame him, for it was a fair countenance upon which to gaze—such as artists love to paint in connection with hovering angels, with more than a little wisdom and determination also written there.

The girl smiled at his words—perhaps the sound of

his voice was like music in her ears, for since the death of the wizard, her protector, she had not heard an English tongue frame speech.

"Do not concern yourself about that, sir. What I have done is small enough, Heaven knows, when you have declared one of the objects that brought you to Zambodi-land was my release, my rescue from this distasteful bondage," she said, quickly.

"Then you are not happy here?" he asked.

Her face took on an expression of sadness.

"Happy—no, no. True, I have little to complain of except of late the unwelcome attentions of Walkulla, and the evil plottings of Hassaje, the old witch-doctor, who hates me in secret because I cure those who are beyond his skill. The people worship me as a spirit; but I have not been happy. Time was when as a girl I sang the whole day long—when the carol of the birds and the ceaseless murmur of the waterfall were the sweetest music in all the wide world to me. Alas! it is no longer so. Everything has changed. I hear strange voices in my sleep, and while wandering alone in the forest—voices that seem to come to me from far across the sea—voices that speak in my native tongue and urge me to seek the fair country where I first saw the light of day. Oh! sir, I have begun to yearn to see my mother's home, to learn who she was, and whether she be living or dead. It is a terrible thing to be alone in this great world, and never to have known your own mother."

She seemed overcome for the moment, and tears glistened in her glorious eyes; but Rex knew not how to *comfort* her, for Rex was only a stupid man, and quite *helpless to assuage* a woman's grief.

His face expressed his deep sympathy, but he could only stand there and be mute, much as he might have enjoyed taking the lovely angel into his arms and whispering that she need never again believe there was not at least one honest heart that was most intensely interested in her welfare.

Presently she seemed to recover her composure, and endeavored to smile.

“By degrees then, I have determined that when the proper time came I would fly and seek my own people. My heart has grown weary of contact with these poor, wretched blacks, for although I have endeavored to teach them many things, they are wedded to their idols, and naturally turn to the medicine-man with his horrible customs which seem to have a fascination over their souls.

“I have been sorely puzzled how to escape, for Walkulla as if suspecting my designs, has seemed to watch me day and night. So you see, deliverance from this bondage will be very welcome. Heaven takes strange methods to accomplish a result.”

Rex felt very glad to be concerned in her escape, although he winced a little when he recollected how very helpless he was, now that his companions had been forced to flee. Still, her words of gratitude were pleasant to hear, and his resolve to take her from the land of the Zambodi if it were within the power of mortal to do so, was strengthened. The determination was there, and a kindly Providence, watching over the affairs of those devoted to a noble purpose, would supply the means in good time.

He had much to tell, and many questions to ask, remembering the face in the locket worn by Lord Bruno.

This fair goddess of the Zambodi was no doubt a long lost sister of the English lord. In no other way could he account for her great resemblance to the picture of Bruno's mother. Such things occur in real life as well as in fiction, and as Rex looked upon her face in the light cast by the lamp which burned some crude oil of the wilderness, he was endeavoring to see his friend there.

It was no time to ask questions, however.

Danger still hovered nigh. To his ear was borne the clamor of excited multitudes, showing that the kraal was seething with a tumultuous upheaval, doubtless resulting from the death of the war chief Walkulla. He could easily imagine that grim old humbug the witch-doctor, clad in all his hideous paraphernalia, arousing the superstitious blacks to a state of frenzy.

And even while he listened and marveled at the fearful sounds, the little Zambodi girl came plunging into the retreat to declare that the whole populace, led by the witch-doctor himself, was advancing up the side of the mountain.

CHAPTER XXI.

HASSAJE AND THE FIRE-DEVIL.

HASTINGS, as soon as he heard in the Zambodi girl's broken English what new disaster hung over their heads, put his hand under the dangling cat-tails and drew out his revolver.

It was mute testimony as to his intentions, and yet what folly to think he could stand off ten score of fierce black warriors with a puny weapon like that.

Deep down in his heart he knew full well that if deliverance came it would have to be through the influence of the fair being to whom he already owed so much.

Therefore, while showing the front of a brave man whom danger could not daunt, he cast a quick glance not unmixed with apprehension in the direction of his companion. What would she do to meet this crisis—could her influence outweigh that of the vicious old demon of a juggler Hassaje?

To his relief he found that even such alarming news did not seem to overwhelm the young goddess who had dared set her power up in opposition to that of the necromancer claiming to have intimate dealings with the Evil One.

"I have anticipated something of this sort and in a measure prepared for it," was what she hastily said to Rex as she moved toward the exit of the retreat.

He saw her go with considerable apprehension, for

while the Zambodi might believe in her as a being not of earth, the high priest was crafty and vindictive, and would exhaust every means in his power to accomplish her downfall.

"If I can assist you in any way, call upon me to the utmost," he said, and she gave him a rare smile that would haunt him for many a day.

The native girl had followed her mistress, carrying several things. Evidently she had been well drilled for this emergency.

Left alone, Hastings examined his revolver which he found in first-rate condition. Then he reached out and picked up the assegai to which he had clung while escaping from the vicinity of the scene where his deadly duel with the war chief had occurred.

It was Walkulla's assegai, and as fine a stick as could be run across from Zululand to Damaraland on the west coast.

His next move was to extinguish the light so that the little cabin should be wrapped in darkness.

This done he too stepped outside, desirous of being a witness to the strange scene about to occur.

The first thing that attracted his attention was the weird light arising from a myriad of blazing torches carried by the crowd of blacks on the steep hillside.

Rex stepped forward to find a place where he could see without exposing himself, for the tumult was enough to arouse his curiosity, even if his life had not been in peril.

What he saw he never forgot. It was a picture to haunt an artist's dreams—a page from the nether world, a *mingling* of countless black and painted faces, *grotesque forms* and flashing smoking *flambeaux*.

Ye gods, what a weird spectacle. He forgot for the moment that it was his life they sought, and only measured the scene as a basis upon which a masterpiece fit for the best hanging at the Paris Salon could be built.

This sensation gave way to one more practical. What was about to happen—would the mad impis forget their veneration for the fair goddess, and overwhelm her in their search for the person who had slain their chief?

Rex noticed with uneasiness that some of those in the advance were bending over as they advanced.

He did not require the training of Bludsoe to understand what this meant—that these men were the expert trailers of the tribe, and that they had followed his tracks from beside the smouldering council-fire where the valiant Walkulla fell, to the retreat of the white god.

Did they know the war chief had been slain by a hated paleface—perhaps Walkulla had retained sufficient strength to inform them with his last breath, or possibly the footprints revealed this much to their keen eyes.

The main thing of course was the means to be employed in baffling their fury.

All depended on the girl.

Rex drew back and glanced toward her as she stood upon an elevation. A peculiar glow began to surround her form, an unearthly white light very like that produced by electricity. Her figure stood out like a pale statue. She had discarded the black robe and was now as he had first seen her, an angelic being in *purest white*.

As the peculiar light increased even Rex was astonished—it seemed to proceed from the figure itself, just as may be seen in the glow-worm or the fire-fly. Of course he knew the cause was some ingenious contrivance which had been arranged by her father, with the purpose in view of controlling the superstitious blacks.

The shouts began to grow less in volume as those below caught sight of the girl at whose shrine they had worshipped these years.

She spoke to them in their own tongue, and an answer came back.

What was said Rex could only surmise, but he felt sure it concerned him.

Curiosity again urged him to glance over the edge. A few of the blacks were on their knees, but the main throng stood erect. Rebellion was in the air—the evil influence of old Hassaje had made itself felt, and only by a supreme effort could the fair god regain her superiority over these wavering superstitious minds, so prone to be led by sophistry and a show of power.

Could she do it?

Somehow he had a great faith in her ability to cope with this new dilemma.

One thing he noticed, and this was the absence of the witch-doctor. Why had he not kept up with the procession—was he deep in some scheme for the overthrow of the white god?

Apparently she was explaining the presence of a stranger in some way to excite their wonder—perhaps she even hinted that it was the spirit of the departed returned to hold communion with her. They were inclined to scoff at the idea, and she felt called upon to

draw on her resources, as bequeathed to her by her father.

These were simple enough in the eyes of one accustomed to the wonders of the latter end of our present century; but when a hand mirror or a string of colored beads arouses the cupidity of a savage breast, small things appear gigantic before their vision.

So with a wave of the hand she caused the white light to turn into a ruby glow, and then gradually change into a pale green.

More heads went down, while those figures that still held forth were wavering between the dread that made their hearts sick, and a sullen dependence upon the crafty witch-doctor who had assured them he had the wires laid to overcome this woman spirit whose influence had ever been in the line of peace, rather than the natural aggressiveness of their race.

Then the girl brought about a climax—it was such a little thing that Rex would have laughed only for the grave consequences resting upon it—merely the commonest of all fireworks, known far and wide as a Roman candle, but to these black warriors a sputtering fire-demon bearing flaming messages of red and blue from dread M'limo.

Perhaps she had never found occasion to use one of these before.

At any rate its effect on the most obstinate of the Zambodi warriors was profound.

They gazed awe-struck upon the spouting shower of sparks, but when with a bang a fiery red ball shot up over their heads, to mysteriously disappear, there was a howl of mortal terror, and to a man they threw themselves upon their knees.

And with each report, the flight of the colored ball was accompanied by a chorus of groans and cries that promised poor returns for the prophet Hassaje's future dealings with his wretched people.

The victory seemed won, for the blacks would not dare advance upon the retreat of their white god after this exhibition of her intercourse with the terror by night, the spirit of the hills, dread M'limo himself.

When Rex arrived at this pleasant solution to the problem, he suddenly remembered there was one person not taken into consideration when thus settling the matter.

The witch doctor!

Where was Hassaje the cunning manipulator of charms, the magician who could invoke a blessing or a curse, who talked with M'limo in the thunder of the storm, and received his messages on the forked lightning that scorched the towering oak or brought death to the huddled cattle?

Rex knew, and the information came to him with a shock.

He caught sight of a skulking figure that crawled and crept along foot by foot in the rear of the shining form of the girl; and he knew this must be the desperate conjuror who had resolved to stake his all upon one effort to regain his lost hold on the minds of his former slaves, in danger of being emancipated by the stronger influence of his girl rival.

Yes, he had crawled up a secret path while the others advanced along the face of the hill, his object being to come upon the white object of worship from the rear, to take her by surprise as it were, and thus bring her reign to an end.

Heaven looked not with favor upon his dark plans.

No sooner had Hastings discovered the crafty witch man than he knew to what use he could put his six-shooter. To trust to an assegai with so much at stake would be taking too many chances.

Nearer crept Hassaje, like a tiger that creeps upon its prey—low he bent until he was almost flat upon the ground; but his glittering eyes never left his intended prey.

No doubt his flesh crept at sight of the myriad sparks that fell like rain apparently from the extended hand of the being he hated and feared; but he had primed his soul for this one supreme effort to assert his authority, and would not allow the coward flesh to control his actions.

Nearer still.

Rex raised his arm, and allowed his weapon to cover the wretched charlatan. He felt no pity—the fellow had conspired to take the life of that beautiful being, and thus merited his doom.

Had it been a chimpanzee of the African woods he was about to shoot down Rex would not have aimed more deliberately.

He saw that Hassaje had slowly arisen—that he held something in his hand, something that glittered in the flash of the fountain of sparks. It was a knife, perhaps a poisoned blade. Some of these Zulus and Zambodi warriors show amazing skill in casting such a weapon even at a distance of ten yards, and it was evidently the intention of the zealous witch-doctor to send this blade hurtling through space, directed at the beautiful figure in white, emblematic of purity.

Hastings' intentions were all right, but he did not have occasion to use his firearm.

The girl suddenly turned and pointed directly at the magician, who had even drawn back his arm as if to make the cast.

Rex caught his breath, but Hassaje caught something more, for a spluttering fiery cotton ball of intensest scarlet hue shot out of the little tube she held—its last stroke as it proved—and struck him fairly between the eyes, as though directed by a sharp-shooter.

It was a beautiful sight.

The witch-doctor's desperate valor was not proof against such an onset.

He gave a scream that would have shamed a terrified elephant, and forgetting all about his desire to regain his old time supremacy, thought only of escape.

When Rex saw him scrambling over the brink, while still covering the squat figure he refrained from firing. It was just as well, since the magician's one idea was to put a little space between his precious body and the spouting fire-god. He fairly tumbled over the edge, and Rex could hear him rolling down the steep, now on his head and anon on his back, shrieking imprecations and incantations in the Zambodi tongue as only a sadly demoralized high priest would be capable of doing.

At all events the evil machinations of the desperate sorcerer had been brought to naught, and for the present at least the refuge of the fair goddess remained sacred.

CHAPTER XXII.

MAID MARIAN.

GRADUALLY the sounds of excitement died away. The black warriors, when their lovely goddess had vanished, lost no time in sneaking down the hillside, as though afraid to remain longer near such sacred ground. But they did not return to the kraal. Rex could see the glow of their torches through the trees, and now and then a puff of air from that quarter would bring to his ears the sound of a high pitched voice which he knew belonged to the demoralized charlatan. Hassaje was not yet ready to give up the fight, while an arrow remained in his quiver or his scheming mind could plot new designs.

The girl had discovered Hastings' presence near by, and seemed affected by it, as though she could understand what motive had influenced him to thus issue forth. Perhaps she had also known of his design upon the life of the necromancer, for he still held his weapon in his hand when, garbed again in her sombre robe, she came to his side.

Again they were in the little grotto and the quaint lamp threw its light around.

Rex had been greatly impressed by the charming simplicity of his companion ; who, being free from the conventionalities which continued intercourse and the restraints of civilization throw upon the sex, spoke so frankly of her past life and the longing she entertained

for the future that he readily entered into the subject with a zest.

Gradually too he told her of his friend and aroused her deepest curiosity when he spoke of the locket Lord Bruno wore, containing the picture that looked like her.

“You spoke of him as your enemy—what reason have you for believing that?” he asked, determined to know more, for the Englishman was very dear to his heart, and he could not believe such a thing could be unless there was a gigantic misunderstanding somewhere.

“Ah! that I cannot explain. I only know that I have heard my father speak the name in his sleep many times, and always with bitterness, as though his sufferings had come from such a source. Gradually I came to believe some one named Lord Bruno had wronged him, and I tried to hate the name. That was why I shuddered when you mentioned it. I am unable to say more, because all his papers connected with the past he destroyed.”

“Does it not strike you there was something like guilt about that act—might it not be possible that it was he who had done the wrong to my Bruno or his father? Men hate those they have injured—there is no hate that is more blighting. Perhaps his bitterness came from that source,” he ventured.

“It may even be so. Surely, he would have told me something, unless he had reason to be ashamed of it,” she admitted, as though Rex stirred up thoughts that had once troubled her, now long since dormant.

“Do you even know positively that he was your *father*?” he asked, boldly.

Startled by the question she allowed her eyes to seek his.

“Oh! why do you ask me that?”

“The same doubt has arisen in your mind at some time?” he continued, following up the advantage gained, with the persistence of a lawyer.

“I cannot deny it. He was always kind to me, and yet there were times when something seemed to tell me he did not love me as a father should his child. It is shrouded in mystery. I do not even know why he came among these savage tribes, burying himself from all his kind.”

“But you shall soon know, for I am sure Bruno can tell all. Even at the end he maintained the same awful silence with regard to the past?”

“Yes, because as you know he died suddenly. A tree fell upon him during a terrible tornado. They brought him home to die. I nursed him tenderly, but he had only one lucid moment before death claimed him. Then he drew my head down and tried to tell me something but it was too late.”

“You see, my speculation may not be such a wild one after all; but this is no time to be indulging in confidences. Our situation is desperate while that old rogue lives to stir up the heathen, and it would be well if we talked of escape. Would you mind telling me your name—since we are to be friends and companions it would be better if I knew how to address you, and I have already given you mine.”

“He always called me Maid Marian,” was the simple response.

Rex repeated it—strangely enough that had always been a favorite of his. Once he had known a little sis-

ter whose name was Marian, but death had claimed her as a shining mark, and she remained only a precious memory in the minds of those to whom she had been attached on earth.

At the same time he thought how very strange and appropriate that his favorite name should belong to this girl who had entered his life in such a remarkable manner, never to be effaced from his memory.

Then they fell to talking of flight.

She had had such a contingency in her mind for a long time, and by degrees prepared for what seemed the inevitable conclusion of the whole matter.

Rex knew the folly of delay, and urged immediate action.

While the girl was just as anxious to get away, she showed him the folly of such haste, telling him time had passed while he lay senseless in the prison lodge, and that the morning would soon dawn.

Delay was therefore imperative. She had a hiding-place where he could spend the hours that must elapse ere another night fell, as there were duties that would take her to the village, for she must pay a visit to the sick under her charge.

Rex stowed himself away in the secret niche which the hermit had evidently fashioned against a day of danger, when the blacks might invade his sanctum, under the lead of some disgruntled witch-doctor.

Plenty of food was given him, and there were robes made of lion and giraffe skins, upon which he could rest and woo the coy goddess of sleep. He was tired enough to sleep standing, and once he closed his eyes *he knew* nothing more for hours.

When he aroused himself it was still daylight, as he could see, thanks to a chink in the wall above.

Had Maid Marian returned? He fancied he heard some one moving in the refuge, but it might be the native girl?

Upon making an investigation, however, by means of the little peep holes made in the wall on purpose for such a service, he discovered that the same old danger menaced them.

It was Hassaje again. The sly old dog had taken advantage of his rival's presence in the kraal, nursing certain sick women upon whom his incantations had failed to produce any effect, but who were now on the road to recovery, thanks to common sense and a few simple drugs.

He had crept up to the eyrie bent upon some diabolical purpose.

Hastings was glad of an opportunity to pay back some of the debt he owed this ugly old sinner, and he might even have taken more severe measures but for the fact that he was averse to shedding the miserable old reprobate's blood in the charming little boudoir of his hostess.

He watched the movements of Hassaje, and speedily became convinced that the sorcerer had paid this sly visit in the hope of discovering some of the terrible secrets of the white god, which were beyond his ken.

Being an arrant humbug himself he could give a shrewd guess to the effect that these wonderful qualities that produced so powerful an effect upon the ignorant impis were of this world—hence his desire to learn their nature, so that he might destroy the influence of *the fair mystery*.

Rex had been placed in possession of a remedy for such a visit of curiosity. At his hand was a long tube, which could be gently thrust through a hole in the partition, and aimed at the intruder, when successive puffs would release a flight of tiny darts, each with its needle-like tip dipped in some substance which when thrust under the skin burned like fire.

With right good will he opened his batteries on old Hassaje, who jumped a foot high as the first dart struck him and gave vent to a blood-curdling shriek.

Then they came thick and fast, as Rex pumped and blew with might and main. Never man pranced as that necromancer. It only needed the screech of the bag-pipes to mark his performance as the premium Highland fling. No whirling, dancing dervish was in the same class with this artful dodger, who believed his flesh was filled with fire, and who bellowed and jumped and butted into the walls in his mad search for the exit, which finally discovering he plunged through, to repeat his acrobatic feat of the previous night in descending the hill head over heels and *vice versa*.

Rex had come out of hiding and fallen into a chair weak from laughing when he heard a sound and looked up to see the girl there in her sombre mantle, hooded and veiled.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CROSSING THE ZAMBODI TROCHA.

THERE was little need to tell Maid Marian what had taken place, for the amused smile upon her face declared plainly enough that she had been a witness to the ridiculous antics of that amusing though vindictive clown, the witch-doctor; and upon seeing him take such a reckless header down the steep hillside, regardless of cuticle and bones, she could readily supply the *motif* for such strange action, even if his shrill cries to the effect that he was burning up, and his skin full of fire had failed to reach her.

The day being pretty well spent, it was now high time they prepared for flight.

While carrying out her gentle and merciful mission to the Zambodi kraal, Marian had not forgotten to listen to what talk was going the rounds.

She repeated her little budget of news to Hastings, and there was good as well as bad.

First of all his companions had undoubtedly escaped, since none of those who hunted for them had returned with the news of their capture or death, as would undoubtedly have been the case had such an event followed the chase.

This fact of course pleased Rex greatly, and set him to wondering whether the daring little band had set out for Buluwayo or returned by some new route to search for him.

Many of the impis were absent from the kraal, and yet no general expedition had been undertaken against the whites, so that it could be set down as positive that these braves were scouring the surrounding country for the fugitives, or else formed a *trocha* around the hill where the white goddess had her retreat, Hassaje being determined to prevent the escape of the party she had assisted from the prison lodge.

Even this state of affairs did not appear to daunt the girl, who evidently had gained assurance by long being compelled to rely upon her own powers.

She conversed quietly upon the subject, and her manner gave Rex the utmost confidence in the probable result.

A meal was cooked and set before him.

In many ways it was as strange a supper as he had ever sat down to in all his life, but with that delightful being on the opposite side of the board that served as a table the whole affair was simply charming. Association has much to do with one's enjoyment, and under this bewitching presence, the decoction that went under the name of tea, and which Rex as a connoisseur might at another time have deemed an extremely bitter herb, now tasted like ambrosia, nectar fit for the gods.

He was already under the influence, and in a fair way to be hard hit.

Their plans were speedily arranged, and the docile Zambodi girl entered into them, ready to do all that her beloved mistress said. She owed her life to Marian who had saved her when a mad parent in obedience to the promptings of the inhuman witch-doctor, had been about to sacrifice his own child at the stake, in order to *propitiate* the terrible god M'limo.

Although the girl would have met her sad fate with the remarkable fortitude of her race, possibly with songs on her lips as the fire curled up around her, just as martyrs have done in the years gone by ; at the same time life was sweet to her, and when Maid Marian dashed the burning fagots aside, cut the thongs that bound her, and declared defiance to Hassaje and all he represented, carrying the intended victim off to become her attendant ever after, it was natural that this young heart should worship her as a being sent from Heaven, and only await an opportunity to make the sacrifice of her life if in that way she could repay the debt.

Darkness had come again.

From in front of the shelter Rex could look down upon the stockade surrounding the great collection of huts. Fires were burning here and there, but extreme care was always taken, for a spark might at any time set the whole kraal in a blaze.

This thought crept into Hastings' mind, and he remembered it as a suggestion put forward by Jim Bludsoe when he first gazed upon the home of the Zambodi.

In the hands of desperate men fire is a terrible weapon, and the most daring savage in the world becomes panic-stricken when a sea of flame sweeps over forest and prairie or licks up his lodges like a whirlwind ; for to him there is a majesty in the outstretched arms of the fire-fiend, since most of them have at some time or other worshipped the mysterious agent that leaves but ashes after it has dined.

With Maid Marian to assist him in making his escape, it hardly seemed probable he would need to apply so drastic a remedy, as touching a torch to the kraal.

Besides, he felt no animosity toward the blacks, re-

membering that his mission had been to despoil the ancient temple of its precious legacy:

One wish he entertained, and really believed it would do him a world of good to be given a chance to finish old Hassaje before shaking the dust of Zambodi land from his feet.

The ancient reprobate and charlatan had aroused within him an ugly feeling, such as he could not remember entertaining toward any other human being. Perhaps, if the truth were diligently sought, the reason for this might be found in the fact of Hassaje's hostility toward Marian, and his evident desire to seek her dethronement.

Had the witch-doctor exorcised his deity and learned a little ordinary common sense he might have found a clear field long ago by secretly aiding and abetting the escape of the white girl; but such a solution to the vexatious problem had probably never entered his dense head.

Rex watched his companion make a few simple preparations for departure.

He knew she was bidding farewell to what had been her home for many years, and which must have some *niche* in her memory, no matter what bright scenes the future might open up.

The Zambodi girl was to be left behind, temporarily at least, and there was a logical reason for such a move.

Rex could remember reading of an army about to abandon a fort or strategical post, leaving a few men behind to keep the fires burning and thus deceive the watching foe.

That was to be her mission.

From time to time up to midnight she was to per-

form some little task in which she had been carefully drilled by her mistress, and in various ways beguile those who watched below into the belief that the fair god still occupied her retreat.

Perhaps this would be through the burning of a little colored fire such as must awe the barbarian heart—anon it might turn to a song born in Scotland's borders, such as Marian had taught her how to sing with feeling, not unlike her own.

Rex saw that the idea was a bright one, and did not hesitate to compliment her on it.

At last it was time to go.

They had a long and wearisome journey before them, with dangers on every side. The chances of their reaching Buluwayo in safety were rather problematical; but they had brave hearts, and were ready to do and dare, whatever the future held.

He was naturally curious to know how she expected to pass the cordon of warriors which the medicine-man had thrown around the base of the kopje, for if any one was thoroughly acquainted with the ground the worker of wonders should be.

All this had in a measure been prepared for by the remarkable man who spent so many years among the Zambodi, an exile from his own race.

Hence Rex was not greatly surprised when instead of passing out through the cabin door, she lighted a rude lantern, and asked him to follow into the depths of the mountain.

As they proceeded, he several times caught suspicious fumes in the air, which he recognized as the same agency through which he and Bludsoe had so nearly been overpowered when endeavoring to peer

down into the awful fissure where the wretched black spy had been swallowed, and where the eternal fires slumbered, and boiled like furious demons in chains.

This gave him the notion that they were navigating some of those same weird passages connected with the ancient temple, and he would not have been surprised if at any time he found himself once more in the frowning presence of that assemblage of pagan gods.

Such an event however, did not occur.

Perhaps Maid Marian respected the sacred character of the temple, even as her father had done before her, knowing what veneration these black sons of Africa had for the idols before which their ancestors or the people who dwelt in the crater centuries back, were wont to prostrate themselves—at any rate she had never gazed upon those monsters of a bygone day, which was a blessed thing with regard to her peace of mind, since their hideous faces were enough to haunt one's sleep for many a year.

This fidelity to a trust bequeathed from generation to generation, has numerous examples in the life history of the aborigines of the New World.

In Mexico, in Arizona, and in Peru the Indians faithfully guard the ruins of ancient temples where the Aztecs or the Incas worshipped gods representing the sun.

These people have not for many generations prostrated themselves before the fire god, and only by tradition do they know what was the character of those devotions belonging to a musty and dim past; and yet in their eyes a sort of fanatical sacredness hangs over certain secret cave-temples, which are zealously guarded in order that the profane foot of no white man shall ever enter to defile them.

After considerable winding about in narrow passages, Hastings' fair guide told him they were close to the exit.

She thereupon extinguished the light which had thus far been of inestimable value to them as a guide to their feet, and the gloom seemed doubly dense in consequence.

Rex felt a hand touch his, and was wonderfully docile about being led—indeed, he would not have entered a protest should such pleasant association have been continued indefinitely.

And thus they issued from the passage, reaching the outer air through one of the numerous vents which the subterranean fires had formed in the age when dumb old Krokato was a bellowing giant, raining ashes and boiling lava upon the country for leagues around, traces of which could still be found under the forest trees, and the soil that had accumulated from decaying leaves and woody fibre.

The young American could not place his new position. They were at the foot of the elevation—he had guessed that from their continuous descent, but it took him a full minute to master the lay of the land and figure where the Zambodi settlement was situated.

He was aided in getting his bearings by a peculiar red glow that suddenly appeared up along the side of the mount, and it hardly needed the whispered mention of the Zambodi girl's name from Marian to tell him this light came from in front of the refuge, and was intended to keep the attention of Hassaje and his fierce spirits of war directed toward that quarter while the young mistress effected her escape through the lines.

This crude cordon of the blacks could hardly be expected to equal a military *trocha* such as a Campos or a Weyler would throw across the distracted "gem of the Antilles;" but at the same time Zambodi warriors had sharp eyes, and could hear sounds with the quickness of a springbok, so that the utmost care must be taken in passing their line.

Hastings felt doubly anxious because he had more reason than ever for desiring to escape.

While his own life alone was the stake that hung in the balance, he could be as reckless as he chose, but now there was cause for the exercise of caution.

If fortune should be kind and allow them to escape the grim dangers that arose on every side, threatening destruction as did Scylla and Charybdis to the mariners of old, the fact of their having shared these perils in common would be a precious tie to bring them closer together.

Rex found he could contemplate such a delightful contingency with remarkable complacency; though his good sense would not allow his building castles in the air while so much remained to be done.

They started upon their task of eluding the witch-doctor's guards.

The presence of the red fire above was a point in their favor, for the warriors on picket duty would hardly be looking for any need of their service so long as they had reason to believe the fair rival of Hassaje remained at her lodge.

Stealthily they moved away, like shadowy spirits. Rex could just detect the dark form of his guide beyond. To his mind she seemed to move over the ground more like an ethereal being than one of flesh

and blood; and more than once Rex found himself wondering whether after all she might not in some measure partake of the wonderful personality with which in the minds of the Zambodi she was endowed; though each time he smiled at his folly and secretly chided himself for being influenced by the air of superstition with which he had of late been so completely surrounded.

He proved more clumsy in his progress, despite the fact that he had hitherto prided himself on his agile qualities, and his long experience in threading the mazes of an African thicket.

Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that he believed it his duty to keep his eyes on the trim figure of the girl just ahead. Sometimes the very gods men worship prove an *ignus fatuus* for their feet.

At least Hastings would have done better to have paid more attention to the perils that beset his path.

His feet became caught in a dangling vine, without his being aware of the fact, and the consequence was, when he attempted to take another step, he felt his support give way, so that he went crashing into the bushes with enough noise to alarm the dead.

Then came startled exclamations, a rush of feet, and loud signal cries, proclaiming that suspicion had been aroused and a pursuit already inaugurated.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOPE IN A SCOTTISH CLAYMORE.

HASTINGS disentangled his clumsy feet from the wretched vine, and was almost immediately erect, in time to hear the result of his unlucky *contretemps*.

The mischief was already done, and nobody but children and fools cry over spilt milk. Only immediate and hasty flight remained, with the chances decidedly against them. He inwardly cursed himself for a clumsy jackass. Self castigation never mended anything, and Rex had never forgotten his horror upon witnessing the annual march of a sect of fanatics called Flaggelants in New Mexico, who once a year bear a cross across the sands, scourging each other and themselves with whips like scorpions, following out the Mohammedan's idea of self-torture in order to secure remission of sins done in the body, until covered with blood, and their flesh like raw beefsteak, they faint under the ordeal.

The voice of Maid Marian recalled him to his senses.

"We must fly!" she exclaimed, and Rex gritted his teeth at the thought of having so disastrously ruined their chances of success when they seemed most bright.

Together they started.

She was as swift as a bird, and Rex, who had once actually prided himself on his qualities as a sprinter, *began to believe* he must have lead in his shoes, his feet seemed so heavy.

Twice he begged her to leave him, for he thought not of his own peril, only that which must come upon this dainty witch should she fall into the power of that bad old magician whose hatred exceeded all bounds.

The girl indignantly refused to profit by her superior lightness of foot, and preceding him in the mad race seemed to be only intent on selecting the easiest route so that he might make time.

Pursued they were beyond a shadow of a doubt, for on every hand wild shouts rang out; while the rush of feet and the swish of branches after the passage of swift forms, told the story.

Rex could see but one finis to such a mad chase. It would be utterly impossible to elude their pursuers, swarming after them, more than one of whom might be a mortal Mercury so far as speed was concerned.

By degrees they would be overhauled, and sooner or later must turn at bay, to stand almost panting for breath and meet the rush of scores of enraged savages.

He could in imagination see the blacks swarm about him as he stood at bay—with each chamber of his revolver he might down a warrior; but how puny such a defense. The air would sing with the rush of assegais, and they would make a human pincushion of his wretched body.

Well, what of that—every one must die some time or other, and a brave man cannot ask a more glorious end than the fate of a soldier, his face to the foe.

How many thousands of valiant souls thus met their fate at Balaklava, Inkerman, Waterloo—at Gettysburg and the host of battles around Richmond? Bah! after all, only a little strengthening of the nerves is needed to go down a hero, looking the inevitable calmly in the

eye. There are souls that remain unconquered even in death. Witness the commander of a British troop ship that foundered off the African coast—when it was discovered that the vessel must go down, and the boats were lost or splintered, he defied the grim monster, sounded the call to quarters, marshalled his men on deck, and as the vessel sank the military band was playing “God save the Queen.”

It was not about himself Rex felt the most concerned—the thought of Marian’s probable fate racked his heart with anguish and almost forced a groan from his lips.

Not once did the idea enter his head that she might have some object in altering their course—indeed, it was doubtful whether he knew of the fact, his whole attention being taken up in trying to maintain his equilibrium and produce as much speed as possible, so that she might not be delayed.

It was such a race as must remain like an ugly dream forever in a man’s mind—a test of endurance and swiftness the outcome of which must be life or death.

Three separate times Rex sprawled his full length upon the ground, but he was up again like a flash, and speeding on.

His breath came in gasps, his brain seemed on fire, and every fibre of his body was trembling under the strain.

Never in all his life had he put forth such violent exertions, and it was really disheartening to find them all in vain.

No matter how he dashed along over all manner of obstacles, regardless of bruises and cuts, following the lead of his guide, the sounds of pursuit followed close *at his heels*, with the steady persistence of fate.

He even had a sudden horrible fear that the black warriors were heading them off; and that it was only the quick turns on the part of the girl that prevented this catastrophe from being consummated.

Of course such tactics, while successful for a time, could not long prevail.

Hastings gripped his weapon with a feverish eagerness to open upon the foe—he felt as though a volcano seethed within his breast, and that a vent must speedily be forthcoming—his nervous system was in fact wrought up to such a pitch that something must soon give way, so great was the strain.

Still he found no mark at which he could discharge one of the death's messengers concealed within the cylinder of his modern six shooter, for while the runners were on either side they did not seem to believe the time had come to close in.

Though the American had not been aware of the fact, and had believed her occasional words of encouragement were simply intended to buoy up his spirits, Maid Marian had a deep motive in changing the line of their flight, so that instead of running directly away from the mountain they were now headed in such a way that it would require but a slight turn to bring them directly into the kraal.

She knew full well that with these men tigers in pursuit they could never escape by direct flight.

A terrible tragedy was impending. She doubtless thought more of the American than of herself. If a stay in the execution could be secured, something might crop up in their favor.

This was the utmost of her hope—to put off the evil moment as long as possible.

She knew of a chance—perhaps a very slim one, but anything was better than the certain fate awaiting them if they continued to exhaust themselves in the unequal race.

Without warning Rex suddenly saw the stockade on his left, and by this he knew they had almost retraced their course.

Then for the first time it dawned upon his mind that Marian had some plan in view—he watched her more closely than before, endeavoring to recruit his almost exhausted strength in order to be ready for the crisis, which he knew must be close at hand.

A wall loomed up in front—what appeared to be the front of a log cabin, strange as such a thing might seem in this country where the natives seldom dream of putting up a shelter more substantial than those made of grass and bark, with thatched roofs.

The girl darted through the doorway, and Hastings followed, but staggering, fell.

She seized hold of his arm and with a strength he had not dreamed she possessed dragged him across the sill, even while the savage shouts sounded in his ears that told of the arrival of the enemy.

Then the heavy door was slammed shut and a bar dropped into place, but not an instant too soon, for the dull impact of human bodies striking the timbers could be distinctly heard.

Rex had by this time managed to struggle to his knees.

He was somewhat confused, but the fact that they were temporarily safe from the fury of the black horde made a deep impression on his mind.

Nor was he apt to soon forget that he had been

drawn behind the barricade by the little white hand of the fair being across whose path he had been thrown by one of the strangest freaks on record.

With each passing second Rex became more like himself, and presently was able to use his voice.

Of course his first thought was to discover what manner of place it might be they had entered. Along the American frontier in days gone by, such cabins had sheltered the early settlers, and were on many an occasion of sudden attack turned into stout forts or blockhouses, behind the walls of which the inmates used their long rifles upon the Indians, with deadly effect.

A few words from the girl dissipated what there was of mystery clinging about the little hut.

It had been their home when they first came to live among the neighbors of the warlike Matabele whose headquarters had been Buluwayo. Later on they had abandoned the cabin and sought refuge up on the side of the mountain. The hermit had with his own hands built the little structure just outside the walls of the kraal, and though years had since fled it was about as sturdy and substantial as when first erected.

After all it was but a respite or breathing spell that was granted them. The end seemed just as certain as when they were running before the impis.

Already came the thunder of weapons on the oaken panels of the rude door, as some of the more impatient among the braves started to break a passage into the cabin.

Rex had his revolver, but once that was exhausted how could he stay the awful tide?

Louder grew the pounding, whether done with rude

axes or the points of spears, and Rex could hear the splinters of wood being torn away.

He nerved himself for the crisis, and took up his station near the door. At least he would block the passage with bodies for a time. When the revolver failed him he might use it as a cudgel, and thus fighting go down under the weight of his foes.

A splinter struck him, as one of the spears cut through the wood. This warned him to step to one side where he waited with feverish eagerness the opening of what he had every reason to believe would be his last mortal encounter.

Of course it was pitch dark, and he had not the remotest idea what the girl had been doing this while.

He was just on the point of calling out to warn her of the danger when he felt her tugging at his arm, and as he put out his hand his fingers closed upon something that felt wonderfully like the hilt of a sword.

"What's this?" he cried out in sheer amazement, half believing he must be dreaming.

"It is an old Scottish claymore he brought here with him, and which was hidden behind a log in this place for an emergency which never came while he lived. Use it, Rex Hastings, and may Heaven give you power, so you may bring credit to that unknown ancestor of mine who wielded that same weapon long, long ago on the bloody fields of Hastings and Stirling."

He heard no more, for the furious assault of the Zambodi had shattered the oaken door, leaving a hole large enough to admit a man; and Rex had only time to swing the bulky weapon above his head, using both hands to give force to his blow, when a dark form filled the opening, and the terrible conflict was on.

BOOK IV.
IN THE DAY OF BATTLE.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BURNING OF THE KRAAL.

A DESPERATE man engaged in a hopeless enterprise may be capable of displaying a bravery far beyond the ordinary standard.

Rex saw no gleam of light ahead. The situation was appalling, and his only resolution seemed to be to fight to the last gasp, and inflict as much injury upon the enemy as he possibly could before giving up the ghost.

History has many shining examples of the prodigies of valor performed by men whose only expectation was to die in harness.

Possibly the most illustrious on record is that of the heroes Crockett, Bowie and Travis, who with their comrades died at the Alamo in Texas during the war for independence, after making a barrier of the dead bodies of their Mexican foes almost breast high.

And a man with more than the ordinary amount of strength in his arms could not easily discover a more serviceable weapon with which to perform such feats of valor than a keen-edged claymore, such as won renown upon fields like Bannockburn of old.

Rex had Scottish ancestors, and the fire of battle

swept strongly through his frame as he seized upon the historic weapon.

The daring warrior who had led the charge upon the door managed to push his wretched body half way through the opening, but there he remained, for with a mighty rush the claymore swept down upon its fatal mission.

A significant thud, a groan, and the hole was temporarily blocked.

Then those outside dragged the unfortunate back and a second form filled the gap.

The same terrible scene was repeated, for Rex was prompt to accept the gage of battle thrown down by the impis.

So long as his arms were able to raise that good old steel, he would hold to the task, or until he had by such hacking and hewing reduced the warrior band to a minimum.

The task was intensely disagreeable, and only a positive necessity for such action could reconcile him to its repulsive features.

By the time three of their members had been prostrated beneath the swinging blade, the blacks began to reason together, for they appeared to have a little common-sense.

At least they ceased to invite the inevitable by entering such a death trap, and set their wits to work engineering some new scheme whereby the enemy might be outwitted.

Luckily it did not occur to them to use that besom of destruction, a fire-brand, perhaps because of excessive caution with regard to the kraal.

A high wind had sprung up and chanced to be blow-

ing directly from the cabin in the direction of the conical lodges, so that in case the hut went up in a blaze, a myriad of sparks must be carried across the stockade and on to the thatched roofs with a most disastrous result.

This was not the only means that might be employed in order to accomplish the ruin of the young man who stood so bravely at bay and defied them. There were others.

Presently when the cunning Hassaje had been given a chance to think, an attack was made upon the structure itself.

Willing hands were ready to assail it, and when two score of athletic fanatics are turned loose upon one little cabin there is but small chances of the latter withstanding the assault any length of time.

Some of the blacks began to smash in the remnant of a door, using a log for the purpose of a battering-ram.

No doubt it is an old trick, since just such things were quite the go in the early days about the time of Richard the Lion Hearted; and the history of the American border presents numerous instances where a tree-trunk has opened a passage for those seeking ingress to block-house as well as feudal castle.

Time has not reduced its effective qualities, and it serves the purpose of those who wield it in the wilds of South Africa to-day just as well as in the time of chivalry, when bolts from cross-bows, and shafts from good yew bows, instead of leaden bullets met the charging assailants.

This was only a beginning.

Others of the blacks swarmed upon the roof where

they worked like beavers, intent upon tearing the structure to pieces, just as a pack of infuriated wolves might rend the quarry that had fallen into their power.

It was plain to be seen that the end was very near, nor could poor Rex imagine how the inevitable might be warded off much longer.

When the artisans working so industriously above had succeeded in tearing off the main portion of the roof, they would at a signal come tumbling down upon him like a swarm of bees, while at the same time others just as eager and blood-thirsty would come pouring in through the doorway.

He might make a few passes with the venerable Scottish claymore, and then—well, they sleep sound who fall in battle, says an old Arab proverb.

Before that fearful end came he would like to touch her hand again and say good-bye.

The clamor was deafening, so that it would have been useless for him to have called her name.

He had just started to grope his way toward the spot where he believed she must be, when suddenly a flash of fire illuminated the interior of the hut.

Then Hastings saw the girl in the act of applying a match to what he instantly discovered to be another little product of the firework manufacturer's art.

Even as he looked he saw the sparks begin to fly, and held his breath in suspense. Could she save them by such a manifestation of her power? It might cause the superstitious blacks to cringe for the moment, but when the show was over would they not recover their courage, inspired by the passion of the witch-doctor *who had determined to regain his olden supremacy or die in the attempt.*

Sure enough, when the first colored ball flew through the open doorway and landed among the bold wielders of the rude battering-ram, they were almost paralyzed with sudden fright.

There is no fear so great as that induced by superstition, whether shown by a poor Kaffir, a Hottentot, or the ignorant man who meets a ghost in a country lane. The knees become weak and the whole system collapses.

No doubt there was an immediate falling down of the warriors, a hugging of the earth in absolute fright, and when a second gay ball floated up through the darkness, looking like a blood-red, angry eye, those on the roof scrambled down to *terra firma* with an alacrity that might have been extremely ludicrous at another time.

Rex was by this time at the side of the girl as she stood by the doorway.

"If you have another give it to me," he whispered hoarsely, and she put the last remaining firework in his hand.

"Turn it toward the kraal—shoot every ball of fire over the stockade with the wind!" was what he exclaimed.

A sudden thought had flashed into his mind—no, it was more than an idea, it could only be called an inspiration.

She understood what it meant.

The roofs of the huts, in most cases the lodges themselves, were constructed after the manner of a thatch.

Once let those blazing cotton balls drop upon such an inviting nest and the consequence might be readily

discounted, for a match applied to shavings could hardly have a more speedy result.

Only a start was needed, and the blustering wind that blew from ocean to ocean would look out for the rest.

When both of the ten-ball tubes settled down to work bombarding the kraal, the effect was quite picturesque.

Singly or by doubles the colored balls mounted the stockade and descended within. It would have been a high barrier indeed that could have refused them entrance.

Rex was not there to entertain an audience—it meant life and death, everything on earth to him and to the fair being at his side. Others might serve as magicians and enthrall the fierce impis by lofty flights of fire balls that vanished mysteriously ere they had half completed their descent.

These fire-messengers were entrusted with a mission, and making but a slight curve, just clearing the top of the stockade, they flew some to the right, others to the left, causing the most painful sensation among the women and children of the lodges.

It would be strange indeed if nearly every one of them did not find lodgment upon a thatched roof, starting incipient blazes that the hustling breeze would fan into a roaring, seething conflagration.

Perhaps it was a fearful means of distracting attention from themselves, but at the moment some such *dernier ressort* seemed their only hope.

Nor was it in vain.

The outcries from the interior of the stockade grew louder.

A ruddy glow began to appear that increased with

every passing second, and Rex Hastings knew, even before their reservoirs of sputtering sparks and colored balls had become exhausted, that their work was on a fair road to be accomplished.

The kraal of the *Zambodi* was doomed.

They had worshipped the god of fire, and now he had come to destroy them in his wrath.

Such an impending disaster simply paralyzed the blacks. White men would have at least exerted themselves to tear down the lodges that were on fire, and make a brave if useless effort to stop the spread of the flames.

Not a hand was raised for such a purpose.

No one got out the patent fire grenades or played upon the flames with a chemical hand engine—no clanging bells brought valiant fire laddies bustling up, to turn a hose upon the red demon, and rescue imperiled human beings.

Once the blaze took hold in such a confused mass of inflammable huts, and all hope was gone. Half a dozen of the best engines in London or New York could hardly have held the avalanche of fire in check when it reached its greatest force.

Billows leaped high into the air, myriads of sparks swept toward the heavens, and the roaring of the seething mass actually dwarfed the chorus of shrieks and cries from those who fled in terror before its mad advance.

It was a fearful sight, one that could not easily be forgotten—those rows of lodges going down like cardboard, swallowed in the greedy maw of the red avalanche, while in every direction men, women and children, all of them black as a South Carolina darkey, fled in abject terror.

When it was discovered that the village was on fire, the warriors who had been so intent upon securing the death of the fugitives, forgot all else in the fear that overwhelmed them in connection with the safety of the helpless ones now endangered.

Some sped away to the gates of the kraal, with feet winged by a fearful dread.

Others, urged on to more speedy action by the actual necessity of the case started to climb the stockade, which could be accomplished by agile men when not harassed by defenders within; and their dark figures soon stood out in silhouette against the glowing background, as, reaching the top they clung there a few seconds ere taking the plunge beyond.

Rex looked around eagerly.

"The coast is clear—now is our time for flight!" he exclaimed.

Hope had dethroned despair within his heart, for there now appeared a chance of escaping the cruel fate that so lately had seemed to be their portion.

There were some forms upon the ground, but they showed no movement, for the edge of the historic clay-moore that the hand of a Bruce or a Wallace may once have touched had done its work well.

Maid Marian was not slow to recognize the truth of what he said.

The chance was given them—such an opportunity would never come again.

She followed him across the shattered fragments of the door. Outside it was as light as midday, such was the illuminating power of the great torch that licked *up the lodges* as though they were grains of powder.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PAIR OF DROMIOS.

SOMETHING that glittered caught the eye of Hastings. He knew it was the hammered and polished point of an assegai, and mechanically stooping possessed himself of it, though had he been asked he could not have told why he did so.

The confusion was at its highest point, but presently it would begin to ebb, when the fire-fiend no longer found fuel upon which to feed.

And while the clamor arose like the wail of lost souls in torment, they turned away from the thrilling scene.

Although through a freak of fortune the smile of prosperity seemed to once more hover above their heads, the future was uncertain, and might contain much that was disastrous for them.

This brilliant illumination promised to do them one service at least, since by its aid they could make better time, avoiding such obstacles as tripped Rex more than once during their recent race.

There was something fascinating about the burning village, and Hastings several times sent a quick glance over his shoulder as he ran.

So Lot's wife, consumed by curiosity, had in days of yore been unable to resist the temptation to gaze back upon the city given over to destruction, and suffered in consequence—and when Rex landed in a heap among

some vines and bushes he concluded it would be good policy to look ahead.

In so doing he learned that their flight was not destined to be accomplished without new dangers ; for just in front of them he discovered the figure of a tall Zambodi warrior, whose attitude was exceedingly warlike.

Hastings was in a fighting humor—he experienced the thrill of a veteran in the midst of battle—the shouts and clamor attending the burning kraal, together with his flight and the furious encounter at the cabin all seemed to stir him to a fever heat.

Accordingly, when he discovered this lone figure so resolutely blocking their path and inviting him to single combat, he made directly for him, feeling that, the encounter being inevitable, the sooner it was over the better.

It chanced that the spot where they came together was open and free from trees, a little glade as it were, just suited to a desperate duel.

Rex handled his assegai with considerable adroitness, but the other parried each thrust and it began to look as though the delay might prove fatal to their chances of escape.

Although he hated to use his revolver for many reasons, it began to look as though such a thing would become necessary, and he was even fumbling about among the numerous dangling cat-tails with the intention of dragging the six-shooter into the argument, when by a mere accident the wooden pole of his assegai struck the black knuckles of the savage whom he had *marked* for an early and swift transit to the happy hunting grounds of the Zambodi.

A PAIR OF DROMIOS.

The effect was simply electrical, for the toughest sort of a trooper ejaculation burst from the lips of the black duelist, almost petrifying Rex, who burst out with :

“ Jim—Jim Bludsoe, is it you ? ”

And the wild looking savage with whom he had been fencing so desperately in the attempt to have his life staggered back and dropped his own weapon while he cried :

“ The devil ! its Mr. Hastings, sure pop ! ”

At this a couple of figures ran forward, bursting through the sheltering bushes.

No need to tell Rex who they were, for the one in the lead was tall of form, with the figure an athlete might envy.

Another moment and he found the arms of the Englishman around him in spite of the paint and paraphernalia that went to make a full fledged Zambodi warrior out of him, and enjoyed the felicity of a genuine bear hug ; while Bludsoe danced around them endeavoring to imitate the eccentric gestures and hops of a warrior preparing to go upon the warpath, and Little Phil stood near by, evidently in sympathy with it all.

This was an event worthy of being celebrated—an event to be marked in the calendar of their lives with a white cross.

From despair they had suddenly found reason for the wildest hope, and Rex gave his artist friend as good a thing in the line of a bear hug as he received.

“ This is a miracle—we had reason to believe you might be in that house they were bombarding, but I never dreamed you had changed to a Zambodi,” declared Lord Bruno.

“ And how came you here—where are the others.”

Monsieur Jules, the doctor, Red Eric?" asked Rex, as a horrible suspicion flashed over him that these brave fellow adventurers might have met the fate that ever hangs over those who invade hostile lands.

"Don't worry—the boys are all right. We were to meet them here after they had set fire to the kraal."

"What! was that your work?"

"I rather think you got in ahead of the boys. When I saw the fire balls popping over the stockade I knew it was all day with the whole business. What a grand sight, Rex. Perhaps some day we may paint it between us. It would make a scorcher for an exhibition. But tell me, my dear fellow, is this young girl with you the party known as the fair god of the Zambodi?"

Lord Bruno's voice took on a strain of eagerness and anxiety, as he turned toward the party in whom he was so deeply interested.

Before Rex could make a reply several figures loomed up close by, a signal was uttered, and upon Bludsoe answering, who should advance but Red Eric and his two companions.

"The old cabin's a wreck—couldn't locate 'em thar—must have skedaddled, I reckon. But they set fire to the pesky kraal with them fireworks before we could use a match. Glory, just see it scorch. Gives a fellow a taste of what he kin expect afterwards," rattled off the cowboy.

Then he noticed the addition to their number, and when his eyes fell on Maid Marian he guessed the truth, for these independent cattle punchers are quick as lightning.

"Say, that must be Mr. Hastings. This here is quite a neat surprise; and the gal too. Well, if we uns know

what's good for us, we'll levant out of this cussed country like jack rabbits before a perairie fire."

His advice was as sound as a nut, and all of them appreciated the fact. Lord Bruno made no effort to address the girl. The first thing to be done was to make good their escape, and once this had been effected minor matters could be easily settled.

So they quitted the little glade that had come so near being the scene of a desperate hand-to-hand combat between two friends in deep disguise, turning their backs on the burning village.

All this had occurred in less time than it takes to transcribe it, and the excitement within and around the stockade was still at its height, so that their chances of slipping away without bringing on a general battle with the natives seemed good.

Overhead, the very heavens were aglow with the reflection of the terrible sea of fire below, and to a timid soul, so wonderful was the spectacle that some fears might have been aroused as to the destruction of the whole universe by a wave of flame.

Rex immediately sought the side of Marian. Much as he despised his ridiculous costume he could not keep his distance. At least she would not consider him less a man because circumstances had compelled him to adopt such a disguise, she who had been beside him when he wielded that weighty sword, hallowed by a history connected with many a Scottish battlefield when Highland clan and Lowland lord pitted their strength against the hosts of Edward.

Haste was a quality essential to success in this game, for although the blacks were for the hour apparently panic-stricken by the terrible calamity that had befallen

them, their recovery would be almost as sudden as their collapse.

When the fire-fiend died low, and only ashes remained to mark the site of the kraal, the voice of the vindictive and stout-hearted Hassaje would make itself heard in the land, calling aloud for vengeance upon those who were primarily responsible for the curse that had fallen upon them.

Then would begin a pursuit that might continue to the very stockade of Buluwayo, for these Zambodi warriors know little what fear in warfare means. Zulu braves have proven that in more than one fierce battle with British regulars; and the blood of a young Prince of France was consecrated by the assegais of these hard fighters.

Looking backward occasionally they could see that the conflagration was growing gradually less in volume, as the lodges became more scattered.

The work had been accomplished, and when the shock of desolation passed away they could expect to have a desperate pursuit inaugurated.

Still, on horseback they would be in a position to defy the most determined of foes, provided they avoided pitfalls and ambushades, for which these Zulu tribes are noted—a trap is their usual means of securing game, and in war they naturally apply the same tactics with a view to exterminating their foes.

The high spirits consequent upon the success of their plans, were not destined to hold out.

Rex saw that something was wrong when a halt was called, and Lord Bruno entered into an earnest discussion with Bludsoe.

The latter struck a match and dropped to the ground as if bent upon an examination.

Then he used some strong language.

"What's wrong?" asked Hastings, hurrying to where they stood.

"The hosses are gone!" replied the cowboy.

Here was a fearful calamity, and while Rex could not grasp its full scope as readily as the prairie rider, he realized that an exceedingly grave condition confronted them.

To be afoot in this African wilderness, with a whole tribe of enraged warriors hunting high and low for them was a state of affairs calculated to alarm the boldest.

It must needs be something beyond the ordinary that could make Jim Bludsoe frown and shake his head.

A closer examination was made.

This only served to confirm the facts, however disagreeable they might appear.

Some cunning enemy had either seen them hide the animals or else by a mere accident had run across them.

At any rate the horses were gone, and it would be useless looking for them.

But for the presence of the young girl the air in that neighborhood would have been fairly sulphurous, such was the rage of Bludsoe and Red Eric.

The doctor being a philosopher, took things as they came, much as a disciple of the prophet Mohammed might have done; and Little Phil seldom made himself heard.

Lord Bruno shouldered the blame, declaring that it was pretty much his fault—Bludsoe had suggested leaving some one to guard the precious animals, but he had

believed every arm would be needed at the kraal, in order to carry out their designs.

The mischief was done, the horses had been stolen, and now it remained to them to make a safe retreat.

Such emergencies bring out all there may be in a man.

Although Bludsoe was deeply mortified and inwardly furious at the trick played upon them, he speedily recovered himself and began to consider what was best to be done.

Under ordinary conditions it would have suited him exactly to hang about the neighborhood, remaining concealed from the blacks, until some good opportunity arose when their horses could be recovered.

Now the case was different—Lord Bruno desired to place as much distance between the destroyed kraal, with the vengeful Zambodi, and their own persons, as possible. Perhaps the presence of Marian had something to do with this. At any rate it was determined to make the move.

Bludsoe was fully aroused.

He knew full well they would be followed by a swarm of eager vengeance seekers, and to throw these trackers off the trail it was necessary that he bring to bear all the tricks learned in his wild life along the Texan border.

As they turned their backs upon the silent volcano which in the ages gone by had been such a factor in the landscape of that country, an outlet of the eternal fires, Lord Bruno managed to get Rex at his side, in order to question him concerning the girl.

What he heard seemed to give the Briton great satisfaction, for he squeezed the hand of his companion several times.

"You have done me a great favor, my dear fellow. The story is too long to tell now, and you shall hear it later; but Marian is my sister. The man she called father was my Uncle Ralph. Revenge was at the bottom of it all, as you may well believe. No wonder he spoke my father's name in his sleep, for he had terribly wronged him. I know you will rejoice with me, and if the future should unite us in ties closer than those which now bind us——"

"Stop, I beg," interrupted Rex, "and consider my present condition. I have probably ruined any chance I ever had in that quarter, by my appearance as a savage. Don't you think me a beauty, really?"

"Hang the looks—beauty's only skin deep after all. I know you to be a brave, big-hearted comrade, a man I should feel honored in claiming as a brother, and any sensible girl must think the same way," returned the impulsive Waterford.

"Let us change the subject. You mean to explain all this to her, of course?"

"I shall wait until we make our first halt, and then have a quiet talk with Marian. I am sorry to think she has, while in ignorance of the truth, believed me an enemy. You must prepare her for my revelation, Hastings."

"Gladly, and at once."

"By the way, you do not ask after your coat, with its contents, and the bags of treasure."

"Because I take it for granted they have all fallen into the hands of the enemy, and that's the end of the argonaut's cruise."

Lord Bruno laughed.

"You are mistaken right there, Rex."

"But—none of you appear to be staggering under a load of riches—ah! I see, you have *cached* the whole lot."

"Correct. When we had left the barbarians in the lurch, and believed ourselves safe, we went into camp to consider what should be done. Every man's voice was for war—you had fallen into the hands of the Philistines and must be rescued. Besides, the sacred mission that brought me to Zambodiland had not been fulfilled.

"It was Bludsoe's suggestion, about a *cache*, and as he was a veteran in such work I gladly allowed him to assume the burden. He will explain the marks to you so that you can find the hiding-place of your treasure-trove, even should the rest of us never live to reach civilization, which you know is a possibility, now that we are stranded here without our mounts."

"Come, that is joyful news to a fortune-hunter. Who knows but what we may come out all right yet. But excuse me, and I will resume my place beside your sister. If we get a chance at that coat I shall rejoice to don it again. You see I've discarded the cat-tails and the ruff of dyed ostrich feathers. No laughing—it's a serious business with me, but it served a purpose."

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE MATABELE.

ALL sounds in their rear finally ceased to disturb them. Whether this came from the distance they were placing between themselves and the devastated kraal, or the fact that the blacks were no longer racking the air with their cries of terror and rage, could not of course be known.

Through the balance of the night they continued to push on. Marian stood it bravely, her life having been spent freely in the open air, so that she was able to endure much that must have exhausted an ordinary girl fresh from civilization.

Jim led them, Jim who was alive to the emergency, and determined that if their foes did overtake them, he would give the black impis a run for their money.

Twice had they crossed the drift, and it was here the cowboy's ingenuity was brought into full play.

The intention of course was to throw their pursuers off the trail, and as water breaks the scent for dogs, so it could be utilized to distract human trackers.

Thus, the first time, they entered the drift until the water was knee deep, and in this way walked up the stream half a mile, Marian carrying out her share with the most perfect good nature, accepting the hand of Hastings as they splashed along.

When they left the stream, Bludsoe selected a certain place where no trail would remain; and unless

the warriors showed unusual shrewdness they were apt to hunt a long time ere the truth became manifest.

On the second occasion, when the drift was struck, material for a raft abounding, the men fashioned a rude one, upon which they floated a long distance, when the course of the stream changing for the worse, they were compelled to once more strike *terra firma*, and resume their weary tramp.

Rex realized that his companion was growing tired. She leaned more heavily on his arm, and he took occasion to let Lord Bruno know this fact.

A hasty consultation with the guide followed, and Rex was informed that their destination was only a mile further on.

When he told this to Marian she answered cheerfully that she could keep up, and she kept her word.

Rex was pleased with the selection made for a bivouac. He admired the shrewdness of the cowboy in picking out an elevation, for the approach of a foe could be the easier detected.

Maid Marian was only too glad to sit down and rest, and Rex feared she had really overtaxed her powers of endurance.

Lord Bruno took him aside, and after clambering along the bed of a small creek, carefully disturbed some loose stones, and hauled the missing coat out of a cleft.

This then was the secret *cache*—they had been led by the wonderful shrewdness of Jim Bludsoe directly to the spot which had been the turning point in their flight when mounted.

The little packets of jewels were still in the side pockets just where he had left them.

Thus Rex was able to throw aside his disguise in a measure. The doctor had a spare flannel shirt to loan him, and he managed in some way to cleanse his skin of the coloring matter that had served him so well.

It is really surprising how a small thing will sometimes give a great amount of pleasure. Rex could not remember feeling more pleased than when he drew his coat on over that rather aged flannel shirt, and accepted the loan of a cap from his friend—why, he was in full dress, and fit to be presented to the queen, if his personal sensations were to be relied on.

And how proudly he stalked into the presence of Marian again, though the darkness gave her but a scant opportunity of learning the change in his attire.

Sleep was needed badly, and Lord Bruno wisely refrained from addressing the young girl upon the subject nearest his heart. All that would come in good time.

They formed a rude couch for her from leaves and mosses. A fire would have been very comfortable, but the risk was too great in the nighttime. When morning came the experienced cowboys would start a blaze with wood that gave no smoke.

The time passed.

There was no alarm, and when the glorious sun awoke them, all had gone well.

Of course now arose a serious question—what could they do for food? What stock they had brought upon the expedition was with the horses, and only enough remained for a scant breakfast.

Jim and the doctor went off, taking their guns, and leaving Red Eric on guard. Perhaps, if the chance offered, they might risk a shot at a springbok. Many guns were carried by members of border tribes, off-

shoots of the Zulus, and a single shot, heard at a long distance, is difficult to locate.

Rex had paved the way for Lord Bruno, and presently the latter was engaged in an earnest conversation with the fair girl whom the fierce Zambodi had worshipped as a god.

Long they sat there and talked.

Rex glanced that way now and then, and he saw Marian had apparently accepted the other's story—she did not hesitate to rest a hand on his arm, while looking earnestly up into his face. And finally Lord Bruno bent over to quietly press a brother's kiss upon her forehead.

Something like an exclamation, a low cry of pain, caused Rex to turn his head; but the only person near him was Little Phil, who seemed busily engaged in cleaning a gun that had been splashed during their ride down the drift on a raft; so he concluded he must have been mistaken.

It was their purpose to remain hidden where they were during the day, and when night came, to push south again.

The morning passed without adventure.

Lord Bruno had saved his field glass, and with this they were enabled to survey a broad stretch of territory.

Several times they saw moving bands of blacks, but they were far away.

Once they heard a distant shot, but no one could with authority say from whence it came.

About noon Bludsoe came in carrying a fine spring-bok which he had knocked over some miles from the camp, so that it was the report of his rifle they had heard after all.

No damage was done, and the gazelle promised at least a temporary supply of meat. A small, smokeless blaze was already crackling among the rocks, and when meat was supplied, it did not take long to cook it, though for lack of a proper utensil this had to be accomplished in the most primitive of ways by thrusting a splinter of wood into each piece and toasting the venison over red coals.

All were hungry and could find no fault with the method employed, when it satisfied their craving.

The afternoon was spent in resting, for an arduous task awaited them when night once more veiled day's splendor—miles must be placed between this camp and their next stop.

That Bludsoe anticipated trouble Rex could guess from the especial care with which the cowboy examined all the weapons in camp. Should a desperate battle take place everything might depend upon their ability to throw lead with the utmost celerity, and Jim wanted no hitch in the programme that could be laid to neglect.

When Hastings saw this action he looked upon it as one might view the falling mercury in a barometer, for surely it foretold trouble.

Jim knew.

His life training had been such that he could judge from sources that were utterly invisible to the ordinary eye.

At least, with this valiant little band around him, staunch fellows one and all, well armed and ready to give a good account in the day of battle, Rex could contemplate the possibility of an encounter with the cruel impis under Hassaje, the witch-doctor with something approaching equanimity. It was entirely differ-

ent from the sensation of desperation that swept over him when at bay in that lone cabin he wielded the good old Scottish blade, with the enemy swarming over the roof and seeking to overwhelm him from every quarter at once.

During the afternoon the squads of blacks were seen more frequently and at closer range, and toward evening Bludsoe made up his mind they were upon the trail, so that it was extremely fortunate the night would soon give them an opportunity to continue making progress toward Buluwayo.

The fire was extinguished while the sun still shone, and a wretched apology for a meal taken.

Then, waiting only until Jim gave the word, they were off.

It was a journey never to be forgotten—a journey to which in years to come they would look back with the strangest sensations possible.

Seldom did anyone speak, and when it became absolutely necessary, the words were uttered in a whisper.

The moon was a friend in one way, since it gave them light by means of which they could see where to walk and thus in a great measure avoid obstacles that in the darkness might have served as snares to their feet; but at the same time there was always hovering above them the danger that this same mellow glow which shed itself abroad over tangle and plateau and plain, might reveal their presence to the keen eyes of the vengeance-seeking Zambodi, wandering hither and thither in the hope of just such a lucky windfall.

If one lone warrior discovered the little expedition, *his signal* cries would be echoed from mouth to mouth, *until the welkin* must ring with the tidings, and from

every quarter the surging black impis would come sweeping to the attack.

No wonder, then, the members of that little band felt a grave responsibility resting upon them--no wonder their nerves were excited to a tension that became absolutely appalling ere the night march was half concluded.

In every suspicious sound Rex fancied he could hear the tread of an enemy. From almost each thicket looming up on either quarter he could imagine that hostile eyes detected their movement; and many times he actually believed he heard the strange hurtling sound of an assegai speeding through the air, when it turned out to be the humming flight of some owl or night bird of another character, which had been frightened by their approach.

As hours passed and nothing occurred to disturb the silence of the night, these fears which Rex entertained on account of Marian's presence more than anything else, gradually grew less in volume, for he realized that they were putting much ground between themselves and the burnt kraal, and with each passing hour their chances of ultimate escape grew brighter.

Bludsoe announced that they were now in the country of the Matabele, which adjoined the Zambodi territory. This, of course, did not improve their position, since the cousins of the Zulus were at war with the British, and in every quarter during much of the day could be heard the roll of the war drum, while signal fires flashed their glowing messages from kopje and isolated peaks after the day king had sank to rest, and night brooded over the land.

Again a halt.

The night was well spent, and Marian weary.

Bludsoe had been on the alert, and once more took his little company into retired quarters where the day might be passed without more than the ordinary chance of discovery.

Of course a certain risk hung above them always, for if passing eyes noted their trail, suspicion would be engendered, with a possible chance of discovery.

As before, Jim selected an elevation for their second camp. Its advantages were numerous, and every one recognized them.

Here they passed the second day.

Bludsoe had managed to arrange matters so that their trail appeared to pass the elevation and ended at the drift beyond.

Anyone following them would doubtless believe they had gone down the stream.

It was well he did so.

During the day the various bodies of marching impis that came within range of the field glass astonished them.

“Bless me,” declared Lord Bruno, as he saw the tenth detachment of giant blacks pass in among the foot of the hills, “the country is alive with the beggars. I had no idea they were so thick. Cecil Rhodes must know this if I ever get through alive. I declare the British South African Company has a bigger affair on its hands than the good people in far away England ever dream. There are no limits to these black soldiers, apparently.”

Once during the day they had a scare, when a small party came along, following their trail; but Jim Bludsoe's American tactics were too much for Matabele

shrewdness, and the last they saw of the warriors the whole clan was scurrying down the drift, eagerly looking out for some signs of the fugitives who were not.

Night again—blessed night, since it was to take them another long step out of this country that swarmed with hostiles.

They had fared but poorly in the way of food. Marian did not know it, for Rex saw that she was well supplied. The cowboys had cooked the last bit of meat over an apology of a blaze in the middle of the day, and Jim still disguised as a Zambodi warrior had watched his chance to bring water to their camp from the nearby stream.

All were glad when the day, which had been a series of naps and alarms, was numbered with the past.

At least there was some satisfaction in being on the move.

Bludsoe's task as guide continued to grow in responsibility. It seemed as though they had wandered into a veritable nest of hostile camps. To the right could be seen the blaze upon a hill that sent messages to the next station, appearing and vanishing in a mysterious way that was intelligible only to the savage mind, and serving the purpose of a semaphore or a telegraph line as camp after camp took it up and flashed it on.

Other fires there were at times, which burned steadily, and here our friends knew the Matabele hosts rested, ready to gather when the proper time came, and sweep once more upon the land controlled by the aggressive British company over whose destinies that wonderful man Cecil Rhodes presided—the one individual able to control their fierce leaders by the magic of his logic.

Again and again their course had to be changed in order to avoid the dangers that lay in wait.

No one murmured at this—so long as discovery could be warded off they had no reason to enter a complaint.

The night was well on when they saw a great light miles away, which Bludsoe examined through the glass when a chance presented itself, declaring that it must be a Matabele kraal in flames.

That the spectacle aroused the various camps to fever heat they could tell from the louder roll of the tom-toms, and occasionally with the night wind came a swelling chorus of fierce cries such as could only spring from the throats of Zulu kind.

All at once Bludsoe halted them, indicating that there was danger in front.

And while the little party stood there, in whispers deciding what was best to be done, the plain, unmistakable thud of horses' hoofs beating on the hard ground electrified them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GOD-HUNTERS.

THERE could be no mistake about it—horses were approaching them, horses that seemed to be going at their limit, but which in the experienced mind of the cowboy guide had been ridden far and furiously.

Various speculations flashed through the brains of the members constituting that little company. Hastings conceived the idea that the vanguard of the British force had reached this point, and believed he showed commendable discretion in waiting for Bludsoe to give the signal to greet them with a royal Anglo-Saxon cheer.

With Lord Bruno, the case was a little more to the point.

He recognized the fact that the hard ridden horses approached from exactly the wrong direction to be a relief expedition from Mangwe or Buluwayo—the animals came out from that quarter where the flaming heavens told of a Matabele village on fire.

The two things were not connected in his mind as with Bludsoe. On the contrary Lord Bruno fancied these horses were their own steeds, and when Jim in a sibilant whisper bade them drop down in the grass, he imagined it was only a design on the part of the guide to waylay the robbers and recover their mounts.

But Jim Bludsoe had different views, though he made no attempt to enlighten the others.

Nearer came the sounds, and in the dim light two moving forms appeared—men mounted on weary, foam-flecked steeds, which they urged on with occasional exclamations.

The words startled Lord Bruno, since they stamped the riders as of the same race as himself, and neither savage Matabele nor Zambodi.

Nearer still, advancing in a straight line until it seemed as though they must gallop directly over the group crouching there.

Then one of the riders said aloud :

“The beasts are about done for, Armstrong—we must find a place to hide, come what will.”

Bludsoe arose to his feet and gave a low call, such as Western men use with which to greet each other.

“Draw up, Burnham—don’t ride over us,” he said, laughing.

The horsemen pulled in their jaded and staggering steeds almost within arms’ reach of the cowboy, and startled exclamations proclaimed their amazement at meeting civilized beings in the heart of this exceedingly hostile territory.

Jim quickly identified himself, and when other figures arose near by, the astonishment of the two riders increased.

These men were no other than the famous American scout Frederick Burnham and Mr. Armstrong, the superintendent of the Mangwe district, to whom had been entrusted the important task of making way with the high priest N’dubi, who had usurped the powers of a god, declaring he was the great M’limo, and from his *hideous* cave among the Matoppo hills, issued his orders *that the Matabele war should be continued, declaring*

that by his magical influence he would change the leaden bullets of the white men into water.

It became evident to the authorities that so long as this arch demon who exercised such an influence over his people, remained alive, peace could never descend upon the distracted border, and hence the daring expedition of the god-hunters, one of the most venturesome on record.

Bludsoe knew where they had been, and his very first question as he squeezed a hand of each was to the point:

“Well, did you fetch him?”

“The black god went down—all his arts could not save him from lead after all,” returned the scout.

His manner was far from boasting, and yet this quiet, unassuming hero had by his bold ride into the heart of a hostile country, and ridding the earth of a vile monster, not only avenged the death of his little two year old daughter Nada, who died on account of exposure when Buluwayo was besieged by the hordes of blacks; but possibly and probably saved hundreds of precious lives that must have fallen victims to the ferocious passions constantly aroused by the appeals of the black god.

Later on Rex heard their story, told in simple language. It has since been made known to the world—how they pierced the heart of Matabeleland, and found the dreaded M'limo's cavern home.

A large kraal of hundreds of lodges stood at the foot of the hill upon which they had been informed they would find the home of the Wicked One, where he was seen by none but his brother priests, who carried his commands to the war brigades of fighting men.

There was constant danger—they had during the day been seen by women carrying water, and doubtless bands of warriors were scouring the country in search of them.

A council was being held under the shadow of the very hill which they must mount in order to accomplish their work.

That did not daunt such valiant souls.

The time had come to strike a blow that was to free South Africa of as vile a monster, as cruel an imposter as ever held sway among the wild Karoos; and men better fitted to carry out this really humane deed could not have been found the world over than those who took their lives in their hands and accepted the trust. The account of their concluding venture as told to the correspondent was simple yet graphic.

Both of them tightened their belts and prepared for that last dash. Around them at the foot of the kopjes were probably a thousand of as cruel barbarians as Africa can boast.

According to the programme of the two desperate men not a shot was to be fired. It was to be a seizure—if not a seizure, the knife—if not the knife, as a last desperate resort, the rifle.

Pausing to take a long breath, the two daring Anglo-Saxon heroes, crouching low, ran swiftly out in the tall grass of the open space, stumbling here and there over the hidden boulders, but keeping ever in a direct line for the summit.

Just beyond the open glade they came upon a steep path which somewhat resembled a rude staircase. It was fortunately invisible from below and Burnham and Armstrong passed rapidly and noiselessly along the ascent.

At the very summit were two huge blocks of stone upheaved by some prehistoric earthquake. They leaned together in the shape of an "A" tent, forming an opening about four feet in height and trending downward.

The men were on their hands and knees now. They crawled cautiously across the last intervening boulder right up to the dark and foul smelling entrance to the M'limo's cave.

Then together, like two great cats, they dropped softly into the darkness. The rocky aisle, a few paces in advance, turned sharply to the left. They cautiously peered around this "neck."

There in the semi-darkness sat N'dubi, the M'limo of the Matabele, gaunt and savage, crouched like a spider in a noisome web.

As they caught sight of him, an inspiration swept over the god and he began an incantation. The half muttered words of the chant resembled the mindless ravings of a hasheesh dream. With every sway of his body forward his gree-grees and armlets of dead men's bones sounded like the angry warning of a rattlesnake.

Before he had finished the chant he sprang to his feet, tall and bony, and with blazing eyes. He had seen in the gloom the white faces of Burnham and Armstrong. There was no opportunity for seizure. The long, dusky arm of the Matabele god described a swift swoop toward the wall of the cave. In doing this he half turned his back. Was it assegai, gun or spear he sought to snatch from the wall? Burnham did not know, nor did he stop to guess. His rifle pitched like lightning to his shoulder, and the darkness was lanced with flame.

Then M'limo, the Matabele god, threw his arms aloft and with never a groan fell prone upon his face dead. Echoes which had slept for centuries were wakened from their hoary lairs and went rioting and bellowing abroad in the hills. Out of the cavern pell-mell came the two men, scrambling wildly for the base of the hill where their horses were tied.

All had been well arranged beforehand, and worked with clock-like regularity. Armstrong, making a short detour, set fire to the big kraal, which contained about two hundred huts. In the meantime Burnham had secured the horses and led them to Armstrong. The Matabele aroused by the rifle shot, had, as yet been unable to locate it. The smoke of the burning village gave them a rallying point, and they came swarming out like bees from a hive. The air was filled with the shouts of men, the screams of women and the crackling of the dry and burning grass.

Already the fugitives had been perceived by the Matabele, who were trying to cut them off from the river. Away went the horses like greyhounds in the race that was to turn the scale of life or death. They rounded the flankers of the enemy and stretched away for the river.

That was the story of how the notorious usurper met his doom. Those who have read an account of it in the columns of enterprising papers doubtless had little appreciation of the terrible dangers surrounding the mission of these brave fellows, who took their lives in their hands and went out to save the border from being drenched with blood. Heroic treatment is sometimes necessary in order to accomplish great results.

They had ridden hard ; their horses had been pushed

to the limit, and now, as Burnham had been saying, they must rest before completing their flight to Mangwe.

Naturally they were more than curious to know what strange mission brought Lord Bruno and his little band into this hotbed of danger, and when the English artist declared he had secured some excellent sketches of the Zambodi and Matabele in their war dances and in council, doubtless they considered the venture for so strange a purpose a little on the order of such hare-brained feats as poor old Don Quixote sought.

Then the presence of Marian aroused their curiosity, and the story had to be told.

Rex noticed Little Phil pressing close to Lord Bruno while the latter related how he had long sought his sister and found her in the fair idol of the Zambodi—it seemed to have some especial meaning to the cowboy, for a little later Rex heard him laughing softly to himself and repeating "Sister Marian" in a crooning way as though he rejoiced in the new found happiness of the Englishman. Other events which followed thick and fast upon each other's heels caused Rex to quite forget the circumstance until it was resurrected in his mind by an event of which more will be said when the proper time comes.

Jim Bludsoe was again entrusted with the duty of finding a safe place for a camp.

As usual he looked for an elevation, and fortune was kind enough to throw it in their way.

It was a rocky fortress, where half a dozen well armed men could hold their own against scores, if the worst came to pass, and while all of them had grave fears for the future they were indeed glad to find such a temporary refuge.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DEFENSE OF THE RAMPARTS.

HERE the dawn of another day found them, surrounded by as wild a country as South Africa knew.

The hours dragged along. Burnham and his companion shared with them their stock of provisions, so the pangs of hunger were warded off.

Again and again they saw bands of the fierce Matabele scouring the country, and once Rex, using the glass, believed he had a glimpse of Zambodi warriors, with the knavish Hassaje at their head, though they vanished among the thickets before he could make sure his suspicion was absolutely correct.

It would not be strange, for these tribes have coalesced on several occasions when a war was being waged upon their common *bete noir*, the white settler.

About the middle of the afternoon came a shock. A large force of the impis was discovered advancing straight toward the rocky mound which sheltered them.

At first Jim was of the opinion they were following the trail, but he presently changed his mind. It was more likely some lone scout had discovered their camp, spied upon them in spite of their precautions, and then carried his startling news to the nearest aggregation of warriors.

At any rate the result was the same.

They had discounted such a desperate climax—that is, having it before their eyes every hour and minute of

the day and night, when finally the worst did break upon them, no one showed fear.

Perhaps there was a compression of lips, a flashing of determined eyes, and itching hands reached out for guns and pistols.

They were ready to give battle to the whole Matabele nation if need be, for such men do not count numbers when the fever rages in their veins.

Bludsoe was in his element.

He issued his orders as the recognized leader of the little company, with a clearness that told of perfect confidence.

Those under him were posted so as to command the vulnerable points of attack.

Even Rex, with his small experience in affairs of this kind, could see that so long as the ammunition held out, with ready arms to wield the Remingtons, were there ten times an hundred desperate fighters below, they could not carry the wilderness fort.

This so long as daylight lasted.

When night fell, the danger would increase; or should the supply of cartridges run short, so they would be compelled to fight hand to hand, there was a chance that the gallant defenders of the hill would be overwhelmed by superior numbers.

There was no longer a doubt with respect to the fact of their presence being known to the advancing blacks, who ran forward, jostling each other in their eagerness, brandishing weapons and uttering war-cries thrilling enough to chill the blood.

They reached the base of the rocky pile.

Not a shot had been fired—indeed, the defenders had not even disclosed their presence by any incautious act.

Jim was biding his time, just as Putman did at historic Bunker Hill—each shot must count, and until the whites of the Matabele's eyes could be discerned, not a bullet should go forth upon its mission.

Pushing after each other the blacks were half way up the narrow defile when above the cries of the rabble sounded Jim's:

"Now!"

A flash—a tremendous crash that seemed to cause the very foundations of their rocky fortress to quiver, and the game was on.

For a score of seconds nothing was to be heard but the detonation of Winchesters, forming one fearful confused rattle, together with the shrieks of the wretches whom this whirlwind of lead mowed down in the cut.

Then the firing ceased.

There was no longer an enemy in sight upon whom further shots might be spent. The smell of burnt powder filled the air, and as the breeze lifted the canopy of white smoke a fearful scene was disclosed.

It was a murderous fire the Matabele had faced, crowded into that narrow defile as they were.

Flesh and blood could not stand it longer, and it was no wonder those who were able had backed out of the death hole to hide behind outlying rocky spurs, and recover their breath.

The defile was not so deep by a foot or two, as it had been before the mad assault, since it was carpeted with human bodies.

Bludsoe set the example to his men by replenishing his partially exhausted magazine, and then coolly awaited the next move of the enemy.

Their situation had advanced from bad to worse, for

the noise of battle must have been heard for miles around, and by nightfall every black warrior within leagues of the rocky ramparts would be hurrying toward the scene of disturbance.

What then?

That night might be their last—upon those heights they would grapple with the grim monster Death, and fighting to the finishing gasp lay down their lives as became brave men.

Those who had escaped the slaughter did not appear to hanker after a second experience in a hurry.

They dodged about among the spurs of rocks, or else met incoming bands to place them in possession of the facts.

Thus the day drew near an end, with fully two hundred furious blacks in the immediate neighborhood of the rock fort, and others still hastening to the hub of the disturbance.

Just as the sun was sinking behind the range of ragged hills to the west, the suppressed enthusiasm of the impis again burst all restraint, and the warriors came pouring up the defile, at the same time trying to effect a lodgment in various other quarters.

Again the fiery blaze, again the crash of guns rolling like thunder over the neighboring kopjes, again men falling like ripe grain under the scythe of the reaper—and the name of that husbandman was Death.

Every man stood up to the task and did his duty nobly. When Jim swept his eyes around and noted the regularity with which they pumped the lead out of their magazine guns, he felt proud of them, proud of being associated with them.

Like the first made assault, this one also proved a

failure, though the Matabele would not give up until they had lost frightfully.

This time they endeavored to counterbalance the effect of the torrent of lead which the besieged let loose, by a flight of assegais and various weapons.

Many of these failed to cover the distance and struck the face of the rock, only to fall back again; but there were some that had been hurled with muscular force that sent them among the defenders.

Red Eric had one in his thigh, luckily with little damage, the dauntless French professor was seen tugging at a shaft that had penetrated his coat and pinned him to the ground, while Bludsoe came within an ace of yielding up his life then and there, a keen pointed assegai grazing his head as he jerked back out of the way.

When the baffled assailants drew sullenly off, those on the heights breathed more freely. A few more such mad assaults and their limited stock of ammunition would be gone, when annihilation must ensue.

So the night swathed them about with her mantle of darkness. Never was night more ungraciously received, for in her train she brought new perils to the beleaguered little band of hardy adventurers—concealed by her dark robes the cunning enemy would seek to develop other schemes for overwhelming those whom they had twice assailed without result, save the decimating of their number.

Bludsoe foresaw great trouble ahead, and he endeavored to arrange for a saving in the line of ammunition.

Rocks were plentiful, and there was nothing to hinder them from accumulating these jagged fragments in certain places where they could be of the most posi-

tive value. When these were rained down upon the defenseless heads of the impis, the result must be disastrous. No doubt they would then screen themselves under their rhinoceros hide shields, but in so doing it would necessarily expose them to the full force of the pitiless stream of lead. Besides, when a rock weighing perhaps one or two hundred pounds drops some distance it is sure to acquire such frightful momentum that the unlucky savage below is apt to find himself flattened out like a pancake under his shield.

Burnham and his companion had conducted themselves as brave men should, and were of inestimable assistance to those whom they had so strangely met.

After the second repulse of the blacks, a council of war was held, and a definite plan of campaign adopted.

To remain just as they were was to give up all hope, since there were not enough provisions in the larder for another meal.

It was likewise folly to think of sallying out, since even if fortune were kind enough to allow of a passage through the ranks below they would be speedily pursued and overtaken.

Mr. Burnham proposed the only plan that contained any element of hope, and Jim Bludsoe fell in with it immediately.

The two horses had quite recovered from their fatigue, and were in good fettle for work.

What was to hinder the two scouts from making a bold dash through the lines. If they managed to escape there was a chance that help could be brought in time.

It was the only hope, and almost a forlorn one at that.

Few men would take the risk covered by such a ride, with the scales against them; but braver hearts never beat than those of the twain who plunged into a hostile country to rid South Africa of a monster.

Preparations followed, though but little could be done.

Every scrap of food and all spare cartridges they left with those who were to remain. Belts were tightened, saddle girths and bridles examined, and Burnham even partially muffled the hoofs of the horses the better to insure silence. His experience was apt to prove valuable under such conditions.

Hardly had the night settled in than they discovered something calculated to give them an uneasy feeling.

A fire sprang into existence, then another and still another, until a semicircle of flame stretched around the side of the rocky mound.

The object of this was plain enough—their enemies did not intend that those whom they besieged should creep off under cover of darkness and elude them.

Of course this crescent of flame made the task of the two bold riders the more difficult, and increased the chances of disaster overtaking them; but, having embarked in the enterprise they could not be headed by even such possible disaster.

The time came at last, when the two men squeezed a hand of every one they were leaving. Lord Bruno came to the top of the defile to see the thing through. A whispered word, another hand-shake and they were gone, swallowed up in the gloom below, while the others crouched there on the rocks, counting the *seconds* and listening with their hearts, so to speak, in *their mouths*.

CHAPTER XXX.

TO DO OR DIE!

THERE are times in the life experience of all men when seconds seem hours, so fraught with grave responsibilities is each little fragment that goes to make up a minute.

Such was the anxiety of the band of fugitives stranded upon that rocky mount that it seemed ages since Burnham and Armstrong had left them before a sign of their presence became evident below ; and yet they understood full well that this very silence was the most favorable thing that could happen, since it declared most positively the success of the bold scouts in descending the narrow defile.

There came a sudden shout.

This was instantly followed by a shot, and immediately from scores of savage throats went up such a chorus of yells that the very air seemed to quake.

"Yonder they go!" exclaimed Lord Bruno.

Every eye was glued upon the spot where a tremendous commotion became visible. Black figures could be seen bounding toward that focal point from every direction, figures that moved their arms frantically, and made all manner of warlike gestures, figures that were fierce enough to cause a qualm of alarm in the bravest breasts.

Ah! other forms were in it—swift as a gleam of light two horses dashed into view bearing down upon

the fires, those in the saddle bending low in order to take the smallest possible chance of being struck by flying assegai or spear.

Over the fire with grand leaps the horses were urged. Burnham had wisely blinded the eyes of the animals, knowing how next to impossible it would be to induce them to attempt such a thing unless some similar precaution were taken.

For half a dozen seconds there was the greatest excitement imaginable—the quick detonation of firearms and the shouts of the impis combined to make a fearful clamor.

Then it died away, and all was still.

“I believe they made it,” said Lord Bruno, who was laboring under intense excitement himself.

Bludsoe echoed his words.

“If they’d gone down you’d hear shouts of victory from the black boys below. That sullen silence means defeat,” he said.

All bent their heads to listen, while straining eyes surveyed the dark expanse beyond the fires.

A minute passed—several of them, and their suspense became painful.

Then a tongue of fire clove the gloom a couple of miles away, immediately succeeded by a second, and the two reports presently reached their ears.

“The signal—they have made it, by Jove!” burst out Lord Bruno.

“Thank God!” said Hastings, over whom a sensation of positive relief swept.

At least this little hope remained, and if they could only keep their savage foes at bay through the night, the

chances of succor arriving during the next day were good.

Armstrong and his companion knew full well where to go, and mounted on good steeds, with the lives of the little party at stake, they would exhaust every endeavor to succeed.

Englishmen never refuse to answer an appeal for aid, no matter what the danger involved.

Ere now they have penetrated the Sahara and made forced marches over a thousand miles of hostile territory to rescue a solitary fellow countryman held a prisoner by the King of Dahomey or some rajah of Farther India.

Then began a night never to be forgotten.

Not an hour of it but what they were engaged in some way.

The cunning Matabele seemed determined to exhaust every artifice which could be conceived before combining for a grand assault. Their severe losses on the two former occasions appeared to make them a trifle shy about venturing up that miniature canyon. Perhaps they had some knowledge of the avalanche of ragged projectiles waiting to be turned loose upon the first provocation, and shrank from the encounter. At least such a grand movement was kept as a sort of *dernier ressort*, to be attempted when all other tactics failed.

Bludsoe and his heroes could not expect a moment's sleep. They must be on the *qui vive* every second of the night, for no one could tell when or where the crafty Matabele would strike, and surely eternal vigilance was the price of safety under such circumstances as these.

An hour had scarcely elapsed since the flight of the

two scouts, when Red Eric detected a movement in a quarter where they had not believed an attack could be made.

The face of the rocky wall was so steep that it did not seem as though human beings could climb up it; but these dwellers of the South African wilderness were next to monkeys in agility, and nothing seemed impossible to them.

He gave no alarm, but the word was quietly passed around, and when a collection of stones both large and small had been laid in, the bombardment began.

It was quite a fierce little affair while it lasted, for some of the enemy had managed to effect a lodgment in places higher up than was suspected, and taking advantage of the excitement these dare-devils attempted to carry the fortress.

One thing was against them—Rex had been placed on guard, and crouched down near the centre of the enclosure he could see the outline of the rocky ramparts marked against the heavens.

The instant a dusky figure appeared in view above this, Hastings' gun spoke, and the result was disastrous to the would-be invader.

Meanwhile Jim Bludsoe and Lord Bruno kept guard over the defile, casting an occasional rock into the depths in order to ascertain whether moving forms had entered; but the time had not come for this. By degrees the allies might work their courage up to the point of desperation, and then would come the tug of war.

This first little brush was soon over, and a careful *survey* from all sides assured Bludsoe that the field was *clear*.

He was too old a campaigner to believe this success would be permanent. His study of these strange people led him to think such continuous disasters must only increase the fury of the blacks, and cause them to determine upon more desperate plans than ever to bring about the destruction of those at bay upon the rocks.

From the camps below they heard such sounds as marked a warlike movement of the impis—the hoarse notes of the tom-tom throbbed upon the night air, and there was a continuous series of weird shouts such as Rex had heard the Zambodi warriors give vent to when dancing around the council-fire.

Marian told them what it meant—the witch-doctor with others of his ilk, had instituted this programme with the design of arousing the latent passion in the breasts of those whose bitter experience in the earlier engagements might be inclined to make them loath to again face the deadly guns of the besieged.

By degrees their savage natures would be inflamed until the point was reached where nothing could hold them back.

That was the hour Bludsoe looked forward to with apprehension, for he knew their fate hung in the balance.

Again some trick was unearthed by means of which they hoped to catch the defenders of the heights napping.

Again a rally, a fusillade of stones, and a shot or two.

This time as before, they were successful in dislodging the foe, whose evident design it was to annoy them rather than carry the fort; but the end was not achieved without some little waste of energy, and several less cartridges to account for.

No doubt the wily Hassaje knew what he was doing, and had set about a systematic method of utilizing his

immensely superior numbers. When a detachment of his men had grown weary they could be withdrawn and a fresh batch pushed forward in their stead, while with the whites there was no relief.

The strain must tell in the end. This may not appear to be a generous mode of conducting warfare, but it is good soldiering, for the end and not the means count when foes meet in battle array.

At midnight they had repelled just five such assaults, very much on the same order.

There would come the discovery, a bombardment of stones and the flight of a few assegais from those points where strong arms could send them over the ramparts, the whole *mélée* being accompanied by a series of screeches that a legion of fiends in Tophet might have envied, every warrior in sight of the fort lending his voice to swell the racket.

Then the whole affair would die away, and an interval elapse before the next outbreak.

Such a night will remain stamped indelibly upon the memory until time shall be no more with those who take part in its tragic occurrences.

Bludsoe and his employer held many conferences, while Rex talked in a low voice with the young girl, whom he found bearing up under the strain in a remarkable manner, thanks to the self-reliance which necessity had taught her during her life among the barbarians.

She never tired of asking questions about the world, which she knew only from reading, and the descriptions given by the man she had called her father.

Rex found himself more than ever charmed by her *naïve simplicity*, and the noble character of her mind—

indeed, he could not remember ever having known so grand a nature in woman. Part of this was doubtless due to her own disposition, but the man who had kidnapped her in order to be revenged, must have experienced qualms of conscience that compelled him to do everything in his power to educate the mind of this wilderness flower.

Again and again Rex would find it necessary to suddenly leave her side in order to lend his assistance toward repelling some sudden attack.

He went from love to war with the readiness such a soldier of fortune always shows. Besides, he could not forget that his blows were struck to defend Marian as well as in any other cause, and this thought alone was enough to nerve his arm to wonderful deeds of valor.

Thank God! the night was wearing on.

A few more hours and in the east would appear the first gray lines of coming dawn.

Would they all be there to welcome it?

Who could say?

Each man was grimly resolved to do his duty. No doubt, facing such a dread outcome, their thoughts roamed over vast distances to scenes that were dear to them. To Lord Bruno appeared his beloved England. How many myriads of her sons yearn after that green isle of the sea when separated by desert and oceans from home? There is no country on earth, however remote, where an Englishman may not be found, driven there perhaps by the feverish pulse of business, or it may be, the love of adventure, that has ever been and always will be a predominant trait in the Anglo-Saxon constitution.

Thus far the allies had not gained any appreciable

advantage, while many of their men were placed *hors de combat* by encounters with the missiles so energetically driven down upon their heads by those entrenched above.

Bludsoe was inclined to believe the impis were gathering for a grand assault all along the line, when the heights would be stormed in every available quarter by eager fanatics for whom death had little terror since the incantations of the witch-doctor had promised a quick passage to Paradise on the part of those who fell.

In this particular the Matabele and their cousins are not unlike the Mohammedans, a part of whose belief it is that to fall in battle is the most glorious fate allotted to man below, since those who die thus are favorites of the Prophet, being immediately transported to rest in his bosom in the beautiful gardens where perpetual fountains play and all is peace.

Numerous little things gave Jim this idea, and his training told him to beware of the hour before dawn.

Strange that the instinct of savages the world over teaches them to select this time for an attack—doubtless because as a usual thing men sleep the soundest at the latter end of the night, and are more likely to be surprised.

Every precaution had been taken that lay within their power. The rest must be left to heaven.

Many times Lord Bruno and Rex would crouch behind the ramparts and looking yearningly toward the region from whence help must come if it ever did come, listen with all their might, hoping to detect some far away sound that would give them new courage—the distant trampling of hoofs, the faint melody of a bugle, or perhaps such cheers as only hearty Anglo-Saxon lungs are capable of sending forth.

Alas! they waited in vain.

No signal of hope came out of the south. It looked as though they were stranded there, and must win their own fight or die in the last ditch.

The cowboys showed never a sign of alarm. Before now they had known what it was to lead a forlorn hope, and while perhaps none of them had ever experienced just such a predicament as this, it was all the same in the end—plenty of work, with a possibility of a glorious end.

Time crept on.

Lord Bruno struck match after match in the endeavor to see the dial of his watch.

In half an hour the first thread of gray would appear. They might have taken heart of grace at this but for the positive belief that the storm was about to burst—the feeling was in the air—it affected them in divers ways—they knew it, and often words are unequal to the task of explaining what appeals to our convictions.

Nor did they err.

A brooding silence hung over all, which, in itself was enough to engender suspicion, after the clamor that had made night hideous ever since the sun went down.

Then came a single cry, which Rex was almost positive must have proceeded from the old tyrant of a witch-doctor himself.

It came as a signal.

If the cover were thrown from the infernal regions, and all the fiends of Tophet united in one grand outburst of diabolical sounds, the result could hardly have exceeded that frenzied combination of shouts following closely Hassaje's signal.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PASSING OF JIM BLUDSOE.

Now for it.

Each one of those seven men nerved himself for the terrible ordeal, and when the fact is positive that life and death are involved in the issue, many a weakling astonishes himself by the desperate energy he throws into his actions.

The allies had carefully planned the assault, and those various little attacks which were repelled without any tremendous display of force had been mere "feelers" as it were, to show what disposition the defenders would be apt to make of their strength.

When the attack was on in earnest it seemed as though the black whelps sprang up in almost every quarter—they must have by degrees sought hiding-places along the walls in each previous assault, acting upon orders, and remaining for hours awaiting the grand signal that meant business.

Through the defile they came in a dense mass, those behind pushing the wretches in the van, to be presently treated to a dose of their own medicine.

Down came the avalanche of rocks, and the little canyon became a slaughter pen, for men went under like ripe grain. Still those behind pushed on, trampling upon the bodies of their comrades.

Men, weapons and great ox-hide shields all mingled in the greatest confusion, but those who had not yet tasted of death advanced like so many machines.

It was a cruel business, but those who were above had nerved themselves for anything, and so long as the sharp-pointed missiles held out they showed no signs of halting.

By mere numbers alone, pushed on by their fanatical belief in the favor of the gods whom Hassaje represented, the horde of black, sinewy forms might crush its way to the top.

Having run the gauntlet of rocks they must face the blasting, withering fire of the Winchesters and revolvers, and if in spite of all this they forged to the top of the pass, making a gory mat out of their luckless fellows, it would be to meet three men who could fight like gladiators hand-to-hand, swinging their guns like cricket bats and hurling the impis back as fast as they crossed the line, so long as human nature could stand it.

And while this scene was taking place on one side of the fort, others hardly less desperate were occurring near by.

Every man had his hands full. Rex, who had not suspected the enemy could steal such a march upon them was amazed to see the number of black forms that started to crawl over the barrier. He hardly knew which one to fire at first, but realizing the folly of delay made a start.

Such was the infernal din that he would hardly have known his piece had been discharged only from the flash of fire that shot from the muzzle, and the fact that his target fell off the wall.

Monsieur J Les had also found an object at which to blaze away, and the tremendous bellow of the great yager gun make its impression upon the general din.

As for the savant, the recoil tumbled him over in a heap, though he was speedily on his feet again, as spry as a feline.

There was an abundance of work on hand for every member of that little band. Had they been individually favored with four hands instead of two, they might have kept busy.

The sable hued barbarians seemed to be in inexhaustible supply—for every one whom Rex and his fellow laborers in the good cause knocked back, two seemed to spring into existence.

With each passing minute of time it became more and more certain that the allies had decided to make a supreme effort to finish the business one way or another—either they would exhaust the strength of the fort's defenders or else complete their own extermination.

No longer were the whites without wounds, for in several places hand-to-hand conflicts with the fierce impis were taking place, and these fanatical followers of the voodoo doctor proved to be hard fighters when under the battle influence.

The stock of rocks which had been used to bombard the crushing throng in the defile had become exhausted, and there was no chance to secure a fresh supply.

Although the narrow passage way was a horrible mixture of dead and wounded braves, the jostling throng continued to push on as irresistibly as fate itself.

In vain did those above fire volley after volley into the mass—the great ox-hide shields were able to stay even the progress of bullets, such was their exceeding toughness and thickness, and with the steady creeping motion of the rising tide the impis pushed on, gradually drawing closer to the top where the Win-

chesters and revolvers were spitting out tongues of flame.

Could nothing be done to stop this steady advance—in a brief interval it must reach the crest—must flow over the top and engulf the few whites who endeavored to manfully hold their own against the advance of the foe, which was not unlike the resistless march of a mighty glacier, save that its progress is downward while they climbed upward.

Now the foremost war shields overlapped the crest, and were suddenly cast aside to expose the fierce figures of the braves who had made this ascent.

With cries that would have been a credit to demons they sprang at the whites.

Only a few cartridges remained, and these were put to good service; but the impis scrambled over the crest faster than they could be cared for, and presently what promised to be the last tragic scene of the drama commenced, when the defenders of the little fort among the rocks were compelled to wield their guns as clubs, and meet the rush of numberless foes, savage for their lives.

They fought like brave men, long and well, and not one of them but who performed prodigies of valor upon that field.

Hope they had none—desperation alone urged them to resist to the last gasp.

The end seemed close at hand. Their number began to decrease. Bludsoe, the bravest of the brave was down. He had been carrying consternation into the midst of the enemy, and wherever his clubbed rifle swept there mourning followed.

One of the cunning blacks seeing how impossible it

was to force a way within the circle which Jim's whirling weapon covered, dropped to the rocks, and rolled to the feet of the cowboy—then, clasping his arms about Jim's legs he threw him down, just as an assegai, hurled by no other than the hand of Hassaje himself, pierced Bludsoe's breast.

Thus fell an heroic spirit, in the performance of duty. All his life had Jim Bludsoe seen action—it was his business to take part in such dramas as seldom fall to the lot of most men—he had played his little part in pushing forward the torch of civilization and crowding the blackness of ignorance and savage superstition to the wall. In his own way he had carried out the rôle for which nature had best fitted him. No longer would the roar of battle disturb this hero's slumber—for him the reveille had sounded in another land.

Bludsoe's fall weakened the little garrison very much, but it did not paralyze them. Such was the condition of affairs that even though but one should be left that last survivor must believe it his duty to continue the battle.

They had managed to get together after a degree, which was all that saved them from immediate destruction. Back to back they fought, delivering and receiving blows. When all were heroes, why mention the valorous deeds of a single member of that gallant little band?

Lord Bruno, because of his magnificent physique, was a prominent mark for the attack of the savage blacks, and it was only by the most herculean efforts that he managed to avoid the numerous missiles that were hurled at him.

The numbers of their foes instead of diminishing

constantly increased, for though casualties occurred among them, those who drew out of the *mélée* wounded were more than replaced by fresh arrivals.

This could not last long—the end must speedily arrive—indeed, it seemed but a question of a few minutes at the most before one and all of the whites must have met the fate of Jim.

As they fought like Trojans Rex and Lord Bruno chanced to come together.

The gray light of dawn had crept over the scene even while this deadly hand-to-hand conflict was taking place, and when the furiously fighting Briton shot a glance at his friend's face, he found it almost unrecognizable on account of the powder grime, and splotches of blood, either from his own veins or that which came from enemies struck at close quarters.

But Lord Bruno saw something else—he discovered Hastings' countenance illuminated with an eager expression, and the English artist on the instant surmised that poor Rex must have had his reason shattered in the horrid din of battle, for any man who could laugh or even show the faintest hope under such conditions as these must certainly be out of his mind.

If Rex was mad there must be a method to his condition. What was this he shouted in the ear of his companion :

“Did you hear it?”

“Hear what?” bellowed the big athlete, as he launched his rifle against the foe and sent several blacks flying in a confused heap.

“The blessed notes of a bugle!” cried Rex.

“Bugle—you are away off, my boy. It was some call of these accursed devils.”

“No, no, I heard it. There—listen—now tell me I am crazy!”

And Lord Bruno's ears caught a never-to-be-forgotten sound. Thank God! it *was* the clear, thrilling note of a bugle that arose above the awful clamor of battle.

Others heard it too—the battle cries grew less in volume, so that from the region beyond came the heavy thud of many horses' hoofs—aye, and the glorious cheers from the throats of British soldiers.

Burnham had kept his word, and just in the nick of time the British South Africa mounted troops had reached the scene—had they been five minutes later the tragedy would have been complete.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LOVE'S SACRIFICE.

WHEN the black allies realized what a trap they were caught in, consternation came upon the majority of them, and they began to leave the apex of the rocky mount with even more celerity than they had shown in reaching it.

Through the gray of morning the oncoming rescuers could be seen, advancing as fast as their weary horses would carry them, and sending forth encouraging shouts.

As their enemies melted away from in front of them the tired defenders of the fort let their arms drop, and answered the shouts of their coming friends.

It was at this moment a black hideous figure arose from among the rocks, holding an assegai in his hand; a figure that might have been recognized as that of old Hassaje, the witch-doctor of the Zambodi.

Not ten feet away stood Lord Bruno, all unconscious of his peril—he had detected the presence of the valiant Armstrong at the head of the on-sweeping column, and was waving his hat while sending cheer after cheer from his stentorian lungs.

Without warning he heard a sudden shrill cry behind him, and whirling about was just in time to see Little Phil sink at his feet pierced through with an assegai that had undoubtedly been intended for the Briton, while a black figure he knew full well was bounding for the parapet.

Waterford heard a gun sound beside him, and realized that Rex had kept a last bullet in his Winchester for some desperate purpose. He saw the witch-doctor leap high into the air and then fall like an inert mass upon the rocks, his devilish incantations forever stilled by the young American's lead.

Then Lord Bruno threw himself down beside the boy who had saved him at what a fearful cost.

A moment later and he called Rex, who found him, the strong man, actually weeping.

"Don't think I have gone out of my senses, Rex ; but a strange thing has happened, the most marvellous thing in the course of my whole existence. Fool—blind dolt that I was never to have suspected the truth."

"Tell me," said Rex, in a maze.

"You remember—Little Phil—I promised a girl in Natal to take her brother with me. I was to blame—I made love to her, and then said good-bye without speaking of my intentions. Little Phil—that brother—is Madge herself!"

"I might have suspected it," said Rex, as a score of things flashed through his mind.

"But you didn't, any more than myself. We were all blind. And now, God bless her, I am afraid she has given her life for me. Come, bring the doctor if he is able to move, and see if there is any hope. Why did she do it—I am not worthy of such a sacrifice."

Little Phil smiled when they bent over her—the consciousness that she had saved his life made her happy.

"It is just as well—this was my mission. He is an *English* lord, and could never have married a poor girl

like me," she kept repeating, begging Lord Bruno not to weep.

The doctor reported the case almost hopeless, but everything was done that lay in their power, and Marian upon learning the truth, proved an exceedingly clever nurse.

First of all they left the rocky fortress with its ghastly mementoes of battle, and sought a new camp to secure a short rest ere taking up the march for Buluwayo.

The hills were alive with the Matabele, and it would not be safe for even such a company of well armed border fighters to remain in the enemy's country, since the impis could muster thousands of braves if given time.

By slow stages they made the journey, and Buluwayo was reached at last.

The girl still lived, buoyed up with new hope, for Waterford had breathed words of love into her ears, and besought her to stay for his sake—that he would be proud to make her his wife, since she reigned in his heart as his queen.

Heaven was very good—although her wound had appeared to be fatal, she survived the crisis and began to mend. Lord Bruno was all devotion, and Marian could not but love the gentle girl who had been ready to give her life to save the man who had won her heart.

Rex had recovered from his slight wounds, and amused himself in making little excursions with the professor in search of oddities, and in the company of Marian, now his promised wife.

It was a happy time.

Meanwhile there had been skirmishes between the

hostile forces, but that wizard of South Africa, Cecil Rhodes, had come to the front and his magical influence brought about peace. His name was one to conjure with among the natives—they believed in him above all men, because he treated them fairly.

The negotiations for peace have become a matter of history, and gave Mr. Rhodes an opportunity for displaying his character as a man without fear.

It was about noon on a Friday that John Grootboom arrived in Mr. Rhodes' camp and asked to see those in command, stating that six principal chiefs, two Princes, Lobengula's brothers, and thirty-four indunas and captains of the Matabele impis were gathered in solemn council in the hills four miles away. The meeting was being held in secret, as the chiefs were afraid to come into the open, owing to their distrust of the white troops. They wished, however, to see Mr. Colenbrander, whom they trusted as a friend, and Mr. Rhodes would be welcome if he was willing to attend the council.

Thereupon, without hesitation, Mr. Rhodes decided to go. The military staff wished to accompany him, but Grootboom strongly advised that no such step should be taken, as it would defeat its object and involve Mr. Rhodes in great danger. Accordingly, Mr. Rhodes, Dr. Sauer, Mr. Colenbrander and the press representative started for the spot indicated, every man taking a revolver in each pocket, except Mr. Rhodes, who went unarmed. John Grootboom and John Makings made up the party to the number of six, and together they moved quietly into the rugged portion of the Matoppos, the route lying overland covered with kopjes and honeycombed with caves. Four miles from

camp the six reached the foot of a huge kopje and one hundred yards further on was the trysting place. Mr. Rhodes and his companions dismounted and took up their position by a large ant heap and waited, while Grootboom advanced to the kopje to say the party were awaiting the appearance of the chiefs.

Suddenly there was a gleam of white from the kopje, and all the chiefs filed out in a row, headed by one carrying a white flag. They drew near to the party in silence and squatted round them in a semicircle. The Indaba lasted for five hours, all the points at issue being fully discussed and full explanations proffered by the white men to allay the uneasiness which the chiefs evidently felt at certain possible consequences of the surrender.

Then the chiefs arose, and each threw a small stick at the feet of Mr. Rhodes, indicating their willingness to surrender their guns, while another similar stick meant that they were ready to hand over their assegais. In return Mr. Rhodes promised that the desired abolition of the native police force should be taken into serious consideration. The chiefs solemnly replied that hostilities should cease at once, and guaranteed the safety of the roads and of the coaches. Mr. Rhodes and his party were so impressed with the honest motives of the chiefs that they even expressed their willingness to return to their stronghold with them.

The chiefs, whose names were Somabulana, Mluzalu, Secombo, Dhlism, Gunn, Manyta, Maleve, Sikhota, Nyanda and Bidi, together with Lobengula's brothers, Many and Kavula, held absolute sway in the Matoppos. Consequently the news of their surrender, which Mr. Rhodes insisted must be unconditional, a stipula-

tion to which, moreover, the chiefs agreed, caused great rejoicing in Buluwayo and over the whole border.

Meanwhile Rex and Lord Bruno had organized a secret expedition to the land of the Zambodi, to recover the contents of the *cache*. They found the golden treasure and the precious gems safe and sound, and as the utmost care was taken to avoid any collision with the natives, no occasion arose to necessitate the use of fire-arms.

On the way back they visited the lone grave in the bush and dropped a tear in memory of the gallant fellow who had fallen as he had ever lived, with his face to the foe; nor will Jim Bludsoe ever be forgotten while life remains to them.

Long ere this Rex had told Lord Bruno the strange story of how he learned about the contents of the buried temple from a sea captain whom he was enabled to assist when in dire distress and dying of the plague in Bombay.

Although there was some reason to believe the man might have been suffering under an hallucination, he seemed so positive, and the adventure promised such amazing results if it resulted the right way, that in the end Rex decided to kill two birds with one stone, having long intended to make a journey through the heart of Darkest Africa.

The result was his expedition which had turned out so disastrously from the point of an exploration, but eminently successful as an argosy.

At the time we write, a little party of four has left Cape Town on a staunch English steamer bound for London. Lord Bruno is no longer a bachelor, and a more devoted husband it would be hard to find than

the big Englishman who bends over his wee wife, anticipating her every wish. They have been comrades in camp and in battle—they will be comrades through life.

And Rex looks eagerly forward to their arrival in old England, since he has the promise of the fair god to enter into a contract whereby it will be his privilege to worship at her shrine "until death do them part."

THE END.



the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are aged 65 and over has increased from 10.5 million to 13.5 million, and the number of people aged 75 and over has increased from 4.5 million to 6.5 million (Office for National Statistics 2000).

There is a growing awareness of the need to address the needs of older people, and the need to ensure that the health care system is able to meet the needs of older people. The Department of Health (2000) has published a strategy for older people, which sets out the government's commitment to older people and the need to ensure that the health care system is able to meet the needs of older people.

The strategy for older people (Department of Health 2000) sets out the government's commitment to older people and the need to ensure that the health care system is able to meet the needs of older people. The strategy is based on the following principles:

- Older people should be able to live independently and actively in their own homes for as long as possible.
- Older people should be able to access the services and support they need to live independently and actively in their own homes.
- Older people should be able to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.
- Older people should be able to live in a safe and secure environment.

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